How is decoloniality practiced in museums around the world? In this review of Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska’s *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples* from 2021, I present the key arguments and layout of the book and show how the challenges of museum decolonization presented by the authors are also evident in the South African museums and art galleries where I have conducted fieldwork in recent years. As colonialism was not just a “historical policy concerning the domination of other territories and their peoples [but also a system that] included racial and racist ideologies to ‘legitimize’ . . . domination, the suppression of aspects of identity such as language and traditions, and the propaganda of a Western system of knowledge” (11), it is no surprise that the legacies of colonialism are still very present in contemporary museums. The key question that Ariese and Wróblewska’s guide focuses on is thus how this “multi-tentacled entity that continues to influence and affect many aspects of the world today” is dealt with—not only in what is referred to as “colonial museums” founded at the height of European colonialism in the late nineteenth century, but in all kinds of museums (11). As the authors emphasize in the introduction to their six-chapter collection of global examples of attempts to decolonize museums, colonialism is a “societal problem, not merely a problem for museums” (12). As a result, they argue, the need to decolonize is not restricted to museums focusing on, or themselves having, a colonial history, but something that is “relevant to all museums, even brand-new institutions” (12).

To highlight that the focus of their book goes beyond the topic of restituting museum objects to their places of origin, Ariese and Wróblewska have chosen to speak of practicing decoloniality as a “process and a mode of thought that goes deeper into untangling the present-day colonial hooks from the museum” (12). As examples of how decolonization stretches beyond object repatriation, the authors list “changed narratives and word usage in exhibitions, different hiring policies, new educational programs, and above all an awareness of colonial inheritances and problems that are openly discussed and highlighted” (12). The wide span of examples from museums around the globe that the book covers shows that “colonialism has left different marks on different communities and their institutions” (12). It further emphasizes that “decoloniality logically requires a unique approach in every case” (12). The different examples, which are presented in chapters focusing thematically on visibility, inclusivity, decentering, empathy, transparency,
and vulnerability, are thus not presented to compare them to each other or categorize them as either examples of best or worst practices. Rather, the place-specific examples are presented as a “collection of practices [that] aim to present evaluations of the examples included” (13).

Presenting 16 examples in a book of just over one hundred pages and listing many more (each chapter ends with a list of suggested further reading as well as a list of further examples), naturally means that each case is dealt with in only a rather superficial manner. However, this does not mean that the book in its entirety comes across as shallow. The cases are well chosen to exemplify the six themes of the book, illustrating with (often ongoing) examples from the field, how museum professionals in recent years have attempted to rethink and decolonize their practices. This gives the book an easy-to-read feel that will provide museum staff and practitioners (the authors’ key attempted audience) a quick but nevertheless inspiring and thought-provoking overview of how differently decolonization can be handled depending on their location and place-specific circumstances.

As the authors themselves remark, their book is not a typical monograph on how museums are decolonizing: “It is a conceptual framework to help museum staff, scholars, and students think about practicing decoloniality, coupled with practical examples from the field” (16). As such, Practicing Decoloniality in Museums can be seen as a general overview of examples from different museums around the world, where curators, artists, and museum professionals alike have attempted to rethink their practices and decolonize their institutions from within. It is worth noticing—as the authors are also fully aware—that the examples chosen are “not all-encompassing, nor evenly balanced in terms of geographical or cultural representation” (15). The cases chosen by the authors provide a wide range of examples of how museums work with and seek to achieve specific goals but are simultaneously a reflection of institutions and practices of which the authors have personal knowledge. The presentations of the cases benefit from this personal knowledge, but the examples are at the same time a selection that reflects the personal and professional biases of the two authors. Consequently, the book has a slight overweight of examples from continental Europe (seven), the UK (six), as well as the US and Canada (five). The cases presented nevertheless provide a wide selection of examples that have the potential to serve as inspiration for museum professionals worldwide, who seek to rethink their practices from a decolonial perspective, in their specific settings. Below, I present a few examples from museums and art galleries in South Africa that will illustrate how decolonial challenges are indeed a global phenomenon and that the need to rethink curatorial practices is far from limited to Europe and North America.

These examples are linked to an aspect that Ariese and Wróblewska could have dealt with more thoroughly in their guide, namely how inclusivity in museums is also related to the reclassification of objects within the museum sector. This is an aspect that I have explored in recent publications (Nielsen 2021; Nielson forthcoming), as well as in my PhD thesis (Nielsen 2019), which I wrote based on fieldwork conducted in South Africa between 2016 and 2018.1 At the Iziko South African National Gallery (SANG) in Cape Town, I experienced how the curators were continuing a process of reclassification of historical art objects originating from southern Africa—objects that over the years have been (and still in many cases are) classified as traditional, ethnographic, or even tribal or primitive (terms that are now largely discarded in the art world). This process has been ongoing since the ending of apartheid in the beginning of the 1990s, where the apartheid regime’s aim to classify Black South Africans as “second-class citizens” (Taylor 1994: 37) came to an end. The process entails a diversification of collections held by art galleries like the Iziko SANG or the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), where objects formerly exhibited as ethnographica in natural history museums (Goodnow 2006: 53; Nettleton 2013: 421), are now considered and displayed as works of art. However, this reclassification—
which was initiated as a kind of valorization of the objects on display—was largely performed by a group of white South African curators who oversaw an important element in their attempts to diversify the collections they were working with: they only deployed an inclusive way of perceiving art in the case of objects made by Black South African artists and craftspeople (Tietze 2017: 175). Some of the objects that were now starting to be perceived as art had not been made as art and had only started being perceived as such when they entered the white cube interiors of museums and art galleries.

At the SANG (the Xhosa term for hearth, iziko, was not added until 1999), issues about “art” and “craft” were often raised in the so-called transformative years of the 1990s. The new director of the gallery, Marylyn Martin (quoted in Bedford 1996: 18), took it upon herself to “continue to erode traditional boundaries and eliminate categories which have invariably been imposed from outside our own borders and experience.” However, the erosion of traditional boundaries was limited to objects from non-Western cultures. An example of this is the inclusion of beadwork as a way of diversifying the collection of the national gallery. Beadwork is often perceived as a prime example of so-called traditional art from Africa, but most examples of South African beadwork are the result of cross-cultural interactions linking European and African artistic traditions. Already flourishing in continental Europe, beadwork became popular in England in the mid-nineteenth century, spurred on by a relaxation of the sumptuary tax on glass, which enabled large-scale imports of Italian and Bohemian beads (Nettleton 2018). Afrikaner women in South Africa, like women in Europe, were enchanted by the detailed and colorful embroideries made possible by the import of European glass beads. Like their Zulu- and Xhosa-speaking compatriots, many Afrikaner women became expert bead-weavers and started producing caps, slippers, tobacco bags, and beaded jewellery, which at times paralleled the forms of Black South African bead-weavers (Nettleton 2018; Pretorius 1992).

Beadwork produced in South Africa from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries is still to this day treated much differently depending on who produced it. While not belonging exclusively to any one group of South Africans, beadwork made by Black South Africans has largely gone from being exhibited as ethnographica in ethnographic or natural history museums to being exhibited as art in art galleries like the Iziko SANG. Beadwork made by white South Africans, on the other hand, is still largely exhibited as objects of cultural history and therefore distinguished from so-called fine art. The parts of South African beadwork exhibited in art galleries are today mostly exhibited on neutral backgrounds in white cube gallery interiors. But as the South African art historian and former director of Wits Art Museum Anitra Nettleton (2018) has emphasized, most beadwork was “never made as something abstracted from bodies.” This exhibition practice emphasizes the artistic nature of the objects rather than their function as body adornments and highlights their aesthetic qualities, but it also denies the “essential link [of the beadwork] to the bodies of the persons that wore them.” In the nineteenth and throughout most of the twentieth centuries, beadwork made by Black South Africans would have been displayed in ethnographic settings, which would have highlighted the functional qualities of the beadwork rather than—or in combination with—the aesthetic aspects. But since most “imaging of Black South Africans wearing beadwork . . . until very recently [was] produced by white colonial agents, visitors, or settlers,” these kinds of displays have now largely been discarded. What remains on display are artworks, not made as such, in art galleries eager to diversify their historical collections with objects from all sectors of society.

As the South African archaeologist and former director of Iziko Museums Patricia Davison (1993: 24) has highlighted, the question is not whether beadwork can be considered art. Rather, the issue is why the Iziko SANG and other art galleries in South Africa chose (and continuously choose) to define and present beadwork made by Black South Africans as art, when they do not
include beadwork made by white South Africans. An explanation for the lack of acquisitions of white African, European, or so-called Western craft and design products can be found in the era of redress, which was central to museum policies in South Africa in the early post-apartheid years. As the South African art historian Anna Tietze (2017: 175) has argued in History of the Iziko South African National Gallery, “there needed to be a particularly heavy investment in African artefacts after decades in which they had been almost completely overlooked [but when] an art gallery begins to expand classificatory boundaries, it needs to do so in relation to the material culture of all communities.” By leaving out European or Western craft and design products, the curators of the Iziko SANG invariably failed to challenge the conventional definitions of art they set out to speak out against. By keeping the distinction between European or white South African high art and European or white African craft and design (often classified as cultural historical objects and displayed in museums of arts and crafts), South African curators of the 1990s did not change their views of objects of Black African origin but merely reclassified them as art rather than ethnographica. In this way the curators continued what the American anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2004: 3) has called “the most arrogant [kind of] Eurocentrism . . . the kind that automatically assumes pride of place for Western ‘high culture’ [which is] itself an opaque concept despite a superficial gloss of obviousness.”

As the example above shows, curators of art from South Africa who, in their desire to transform their institutions post-apartheid, began to include previously non-included objects of Black African origin into their collections, adopted an inclusive way of perceiving art, but only did so when classifying objects made by Black African artists and craftspeople. The division of art and social historical objects when classifying objects of European or white South African origin is in many cases not applied in collections of objects of Black South African origin. Or, as one of the curators at JAG whom I interviewed during my fieldwork put it, her Black and Zulu-speaking grandmother’s everyday objects went from being exhibited in natural history museums to being exhibited in art galleries, while my white and Danish-speaking grandmother’s everyday objects would most likely still be exhibited in a display of social history, if they were to be exhibited at all. Unlike the Zulu headrests of this curator’s grandmother’s generation, which are still to some extent treated as curiosities, objects of white, European origin will in most cases be exhibited only in a museum or art gallery, if a certain history or design quality is attached to them. As such, a significant distinction between objects, depending on the ethnicity of their maker, is still retained.

Despite the seemingly inclusive approach adopted by South African curators since the 1990s, a hierarchy of objects is thus still in place. This confirms the need for books like Ariese and Wróblewska’s, which has the potential to make the struggle to navigate in institutions that are linked to a painful past, in a present still shaped by the trauma of it, slightly smoother. Decolonization is by no means an easy task, but Ariese and Wróblewska end their contribution to the field of applied museum studies by stressing that the “conceptual framework [of their book] with six aims of decolonization . . . can be applied far more universally, for instance to politics, education, or social interactions” (13). The actions embedded in each of their six terms—visibility, inclusivity, decentering, empathy, transparency, and vulnerability—are all important components in creating a more just society, and although “it is not possible to decolonize the museum without decolonizing the world” (Ariella Aïsha Azoulay quoted in Alli 2020), “practicing decoloniality in museums remains an important part of decolonizing the world” (113). The task ahead might, as the authors acknowledge, seem daunting, but inspired by the examples provided in this guide to practicing decoloniality, the road ahead could indeed become a little bit more accessible.

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NOTE

1. My PhD research was undertaken as part of the research project “Global Europe: Constituting Europe from the Outside In through Artefacts” at the University of Copenhagen’s Department of Anthropology. The project was funded by the Danish Research Council (DFF 4180-00073) and supervised by Professors Oscar Salemink and Bjarke Oxlund.

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Hello, everyone. I would like to thank you once again for listening to us. Let me begin by paying respects to all the children whose bodies were discovered at the former Kamloops Residential School. It is a tragedy, and we are all deeply saddened. Let me add that we will be addressing the topic of residential schools in our conversation today. We pay our respects to all the First Nations, to the Inuit, to the Métis, to the land of the Mississauga, the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, to the Wendat, to the elders past and present and those yet to come, we pay our respects. To those courageous enough to venture across the cultural abyss that exists in this country, we pay our respects. To those struggling to protect their lands and their rights, we pay our respects. To those who defended their lands and waters, and to those who gave their lives so that others could stand strong, we pay our respects. To those who reclaim their languages and revitalize their traditional practices. And to those who maintain their old songs and play new ones. We pay our respects. And finally, we pay our respects to those who use the art of our time.

So began the conversation between Gerald McMaster, Professor at OCAD University (Toronto, Canada), Plains Cree artist, art historian, and curator, and Tarah Hogue, Métis/French curator, writer, and cultural worker in the penultimate episode of *Indigenizing the (Art) Museum* virtual in-conversations broadcast by OCAD, as part of programming of Wapatah: Centre for Indigenous Visual Knowledge, in 2021. The tone of the introduction, the grace and recognition, the sensitivity with which McMaster handled the, for some, shocking news and, for others, devastating confirmation of decades of trying to get recognition for the injustice and violence that took place in Indian Residential Schools, was profoundly affecting. McMaster and Hogue reflected on, at the time, recent events, as they discussed the impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and the way that it has been reflected in Indigenous art practice, and the impact of curating exhibitions about trauma.

Years 2020, 2021, and 2022 will be years that, as we age, we will no doubt revisit. We will ponder what it was that we remember, given the dislocation and possible grief that we experienced individually and communally, as we moved from the reality of a pandemic to the evidence of continued injustice to the prospect of more wars. Podcasts were, for me, a saving grace; moments of reconnection and insight, representing the possibility of understanding political and social changes, of processing or thinking, still, from a global perspective when the experience of restriction was uppermost and travel was prohibited. Long walks were another, and sometimes the rumble of water on a walk combined with the sounds of running water from the recorded introductions of these in-conversations hosted by McMaster so as to mesh imperceptibly with each other. This series of in-conversations can be enjoyed as online streaming lectures or podcasts on the Wapatah site. They are offered and can be used as a living art history of Indigenous North American art.

The conversations devised by McMaster seemed at the time, and still today, a combination of inspiring, urgent, generous, and affirming. What was being affirmed? The health of Indigenous art history at a moment when scholars, activists, artists, and writers are finding their way into multiple museums to establish the importance, the historiography and the sophistication of this field, past and present. McMaster selected judiciously from several influential voices to give presence to a range of positions, institutions, and ages, all reflecting on the process of Indigenizing while decolonizing museums. The series interlocutors included Jill Ahlberg Yohe,
Annika Johnson, Greg Hill, Jamie Isaac, Jocelyn Piirainen, Patricia Marroquin Norby, Kathleen Ash-Milby, John G. Hampton, and Tarah Hogue. These interlocutors spoke to the varied ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars were, and are, working to change perspectives on historical and contemporary Indigenous art in museums in Canada and the United States. These are professionals and artists whose careers have been dedicated to changing the frame of how such work is viewed and where it is viewed, as a means to establish Indigenous values within institutions and to ensure recognition of the field. Issues addressed in this series were wide-ranging, including the impact of solo exhibitions; contemporary art and historic research; what it is like emerging into the field and building a career; the challenges of directorial and senior positions; institutional cultural change; the influence of networking organizations; global Indigenous art exhibitions and the role of biennials; the role of Indigenous women; the need for critical engagement and calls for reconciliation; and of course, each time this was a further turn in the conversation of what Indigenizing a museum can, could, and does mean.

Part of the compelling aspect of the series was how it repeatedly picked out moments of connection between the interviewee and the evolution of the field as a whole, so that individual careers, careers that could be modeled and are to be admired, were seen as intersecting with key historical shifts. This was witnessing institutional change through the lived experience of those dedicated and watchful of transformation, with McMaster gently signposting why each moment mattered. Each episode is a multipart conversation, showing how deeply important it is to attend to this history of interconnections, to acknowledge past and present practitioners who act through webs of relationships and through political associations. The series builds as it progresses. Each episode feels like a deep dive into a career and a particular perspective on the issues, while at the same time feeding into a critical conservation that is gloriously unfinished but requires us to continue to attend to it as important work. Wapatah and OCAD have, in supporting this series, brought to the attention of potentially everyone the (narrative) act of presencing art in a field whose history and complexity is seldom acknowledged in its fullness. McMaster, Ahlberg Yohe, Johnson, Hill, Isaac, Piirainen, Marroquin Norby, Ash-Milby, Hampton, and Hogue have, in participating, generously shared their knowledge, thoughts, methods, ideas, critical insights, and plans for the future. In so doing, they will hopefully convince the unfamiliar that listening to Indigenous art history is indeed hearing the voice of our time.

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NOTE

National Museums in Africa: Some Reflections from the Continent

*National Museums in Africa: Identity, History and Politics*
Edited by Raymond Silverman, George Abungu, and Peter Probst  
(London: Routledge 2022)

Up to now, writing, commentary, and critique on museum theory or practice in Africa has been far apart and uneven, mainly focusing on single countries and/or regions. Notably, considerable attention has been paid to the post-1994 museums and heritage sector in South Africa. However, this attention is not paralleled in any other country or region on the continent. Currently, there is a growing corpus of new research and writing on archaeology and heritage studies from a generation of scholars in universities, museums, and heritage organizations in and out of Africa. These studies foreground the processes and politics of knowledge production in museums and heritage practice in colonial and postcolonial Africa (see, e.g., Baillie and Sørensen 2021; Chirikure 2020; Herwitz 2012; Hicks 2020; Keitumetse 2016; Laely et al. 2018; Ndoro et al. 2018; Peterson et al. 2015; Thondhlana et al. 2022). These studies and commentaries call for change, transformation, decolonization, and acknowledgment and use of local/Indigenous ways of knowing within the museums and heritage sector on the continent (Chipangura and Mataga 2021; Manyanga and Chirikure 2017; Schmidt 2017, 2018).

National museums in Africa have a complicated history, so a book that focuses on African museums is requisite and timely. This is more crucial given the historical legacies of most national museums on the continent, and how they were part of colonial and imperial networks of economic, political, and cultural subjugation and exploitation, and the associated racially prejudiced science (Dubow 2006; Giblin et al. 2019; Rassool 2015; Vawda 2019). The timing of this publication is also apt, as it comes at the moment of calls for the redefinition of museums globally, and the demands for decolonization, repatriation, and suggestions for new modes of museums cooperation between Africa and Europe (see Hicks 2020; Laely et al. 2018; Mbembe 2021; Sandahl 2019).

The main idea behind the book reviewed in this essay is encapsulated in the main title: *National Museums in Africa* (Silverman, Abungu and Probst 2022). It is, however, the subtitle—*Identity, History and Politics*—that is quite apt and telling in relation to the intentions of the book. This is an ambitious project in scope, whose success hinges on the book’s ability to provide not only a comprehensive biographical coverage of national museums’ diversities across the continent but also a critical reflection on the issues, challenges, and prospects. One common “identity” of most national museums in Africa is their colonial histories, as well as their postcolonial ambivalences, their incessant pursuit for relevance, inclusivity, and meaningful roles within society, particularly among marginalized societies.

A question that is always asked is whether museums in Africa can chart a new, “decolonial” trajectory, albeit one that acknowledges this past yet, as argued by Ciraj Rassool, works to “re-humanise” African bodies and cultures (2015: 653)? Can national museums, these inherited institutions, have a role to play within the economic and social-cultural space in contemporary Africa? For some, given their colonial origins, should Africa do away with museum models inherited from the “West” and instead search for more locally inspired, inclusive models? (Rassool 2018). Regardless of these complexities, what is clear, as chapters in this book show, is that across the African continent, museums still matter. For local communities and Indigenous groups, they are perceived as platforms through which various socioeconomic and cultural claims can be reasserted.
and validated. Museums remain closely bound to a sense of community and identity—hence, the fervent calls for change, transformation, or decolonization. However, as calls for (re)defining or changing museums increase, aspects that still need to be addressed critically include discussions on what the projects of changing or decolonizing museums should look like on the ground. The aspect of “decolonizing” museums holds relative currency in the contemporary discussions on African museum futures. In such discourses, and rightly so, a more important concern is how the unraveling of museums in Africa can avoid the pitfalls of reproducing that which they seek to undo.

This book, drawing on experiences from across the continent, lays bare the colonial pathology of museum development in colonial Africa, and some of the challenges emanating from these kinds of inherited pathologies. The question of continuities and change runs through most articles, showing the ambivalences caused by colonial origins, and a yearning for change and relevance in changing environments of most postcolonial states. National museums in Africa are still regarded as a part of national heritage, contributing to postcolonial cultural nationalisms and nation-building strategies. This is manifest in the financial support given to national museums by states on the continent, even in cases where there are competing socioeconomic interests requiring financial support.

What also comes out clearly is how the “museumscape” in Africa is large, complex, varied, and dynamic. This book gives fair attention to these diversities. This book brings together analyses from scholars, academics, and museum professionals that lay bare the histories, contexts, complexities, challenges, and opportunities with the museum sector in Africa. Going through the narratives on the origins, histories, and contexts of museums on the continent, the book also traverses the binaries and regional fragmentations that have existed thus far—at least in terms of writing and academic attention to museum developments across the continent. In relation to this diversity and complexity, the book provides a comprehensive collation of the geopolitical regions in Africa, across the 13 chapters.

In one book, one gets a coverage of the museum space in Africa from histories, infrastructure, politics, change/transformation, challenges and opportunities, and the new and emergent developments in museums’ development. This ranges from histories to new developments, such as recent museum construction projects on the continent, to descriptions of numerous attempts at transformation. The chapters sufficiently demonstrate the diversity of the museum landscape in Africa, structurally and otherwise. These range from relatively large, sophisticated, and better-resourced museum organizations, such as those in the National Museums of Kenya, the Ditsong Museums of South Africa, and the Iziko Museums of South Africa; other provincial, local, and private museums; the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe; and smaller and less advanced /resourced state museums such as those in Ethiopia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Morocco, and others.

The editors’ introduction is quite instructive and provides a well-balanced yet critical look at the issues facing the world of museums in Africa. It highlights how relatively little has been written about African museums, and the absence of a concise compilation of experiences and developments across Africa’s broad geopolitical (North, Southern, Eastern, Western, and Central Africa) and colonial linguistic demarcations (so-called Anglophone, Arabic, Portuguese, and Francophone Africa). It is thus encouraging to have one text covering countries in parts of Africa that rarely get attention in discourses on museums, particularly Central Africa (Sudan and the DRC), parts of East Africa (Ethiopia), and North Africa (Morocco).

While states in Africa have continued to construct new national museums, parallel to those formed during the colonial era, a question always asked is whether the model of “encyclopedic” museums bankrolled by states is still a good model to follow. Alternatively, should Africa consider other models, particularly those focusing on communities at the grassroots level (see
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Rassool 2018)? This is so, especially when one considers the wide reports on challenges relating to funding and financial sustainability of state museums, as states pay more attention to the socioeconomic challenges on the continent. Regardless of these issues, the book also shows that museums are still seen as important, and what comes throughout the chapters is a strong link between museums and the postcolonial state, as well as the expectation for change at community level. This is partly encapsulated in the construction of new museums across Africa, exemplified in the DRC (chapter 6), Morocco (chapter 1), and Senegal (chapter 7), and in the various efforts at change, transformation, and decolonization.

A noteworthy aspect related to new museums projects is that of the changing players/stakeholders in museum support on the continent. Here, the role of East Asian countries is explored, particularly China and South Korea (chapter 6), in supporting museum projects on the continent, an aspect that has thus far been dominated by support and collaboration with the West, mainly Europe. Thus, on the continent, support for new museums reflects changing global, geopolitical associations, and an emergent global order in which counties like China are gaining more influence in the politics and economy on the continent. The new museum projects also represent the desire by African states to move from the formative “Western model” museum to new, homegrown models, described in chapter 7 as the “insubordinate museums” (131). According to many African states, these modern/professional museums are expected to take a central role in contemporary efforts at repatriation and restitution.

The diversities represented through the 13 chapters foreground the histories and contexts, while also highlighting the changes and new developments within national museums in the identified countries. Challenges associated with attempts to decolonize and reframe new trajectories for national museums run across East, Southern, Central, North, and West Africa. A central theme in the book is the pursuit for change and transformation in museums, and this comes out quite strongly for the Republic of South Africa (chapter 13), Nigeria, (chapter 11), Niger (chapter 9), Ghana (chapter 10), Uganda (chapter 5), Kenya (chapter 4), and Zimbabwe (chapter 12). This pursuit for change, transformation, and relevance also shows the persistent tension between museums as bastions of cultural nationalisms, as envisaged by central governments, running parallel to how museums are perceived as sites of local community engagement with issues, along with acknowledgment of plural heritages based on diverse religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities. The emerging strategies for decolonizing and making connections in museums in Africa is partly reflected in Kenya’s development of regional museums—“to take museums to the people” (78)— and in its central role in seeking new directions for museums in Africa’s museumscape through continentwide initiatives (chapter 4).

Though some chapters are quite descriptive, the writing style in the book strikes a critical balance between providing biographical details and critical analyses of the common issues and connections. The first chapter highlights the challenge of (co)writing with professionals and academics from varied academic, professional, and geographical (and sometimes linguistic) backgrounds. While some chapters read as descriptive accounts, they contribute to an overall understanding of common issues thanks to the clear writing strategy, where all the chapters start with basic details of national museums, giving a concise summary of the size, setting, context, governance, budgets, and other details. This gives readers a bird’s-eye view of the structural, administrative, and funding circumstances in each country. It also provides a summary of the common trends across the case studies, while giving important local details. The different sections of the book also reiterate the general setting of national museums in Africa—as largely urban institutions located away from the rural and other marginalized communities.

The conclusion provides a thought-provoking and critical summary of the issues related to museums in Africa. Titled “Coda: National Museums in Africa,” it is a candid conversation
between the two editors, both coming from different professional and geopolitical contexts. The conversation, open and frank, teases out the key issues, giving a balanced and critical reflection of the histories, contexts, complexities, and opportunities related to African museums. Without pathologizing Africa, the conversation pays attention to the question of whether the challenges in museums is an “African” issue, rather than a universal one. The debates on the North/South divide, the politics of knowledge production, decolonization, new museums, restitution, and the concept of “universal” museums are explored and critiqued. A significant aspect raised in the conversation is the fact that, notwithstanding the prevalence of (national) museums with colonial origins, and their challenges, there is prevalence of other forms of museum-making parallel to national museums, and that these community-based models on the continent need to be talked about, supported, and celebrated. The conversation also derides the universalization of “Western” standards and practices. This chapter is indeed an honest and critical conclusion in the form of a well-tuned debate which befits this volume.

Overall, this book is a good read. It collates histories, experiences, and contexts from across Africa; is written by some eminent scholars, academics, and museum professionals from Africa; and is a very important resource to anyone seeking a concise, comprehensive, and critical analysis of the past, present, and future of national museums in Africa. It achieves its mark by offering perspectives from an African viewpoint on the current global conversations about the role and future of museums.

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**NOTE**

1. The Ditsong and IZIKO Museums of South Africa and are two national flagship institutions constituted in terms of the South African Cultural Institutions Act 19 of 1998. The Ditsong is an amalgamation of eight museums in Tshwane and Johannesburg, while the IZIKO manages 11 national museums in the Western Cape. The South African museum policies also make provisions for provincial and local municipality as well as private museums.

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Heritage Politics and the Development of the Japanese Memorial Site at Featherston

On 25 February 1943, 48 Japanese men and one guard received fatal gunshot wounds at the prisoner-of-war camp in Featherston, a small town in the Wairarapa region of the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. The incident was almost immediately covered up and forgotten. It was more than half a century before a memorial was proposed. Now visitors walk among flowering cherry trees, commemorative plaques, and a replica prison hut.

To help explain how the Featherston site evolved from farmland to memorial garden, reviewing the literature can provide context for understanding contested heritage sites and the political forces shaping them. John Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth (1996: 20) define heritage succinctly as “a contemporary product shaped from history.” Sacred places of pilgrimage can also be landscapes of touristic consumption, “special and set apart from the realm of daily life,” where both “top-down” (officially sanctioned and national) heritage and “bottom-up” (unofficial and local) heritage rub up against each other. Heritage is processual and evolving. Denis Cosgrove (cited in Graham et al. 2005: 33) argues that in the realm of social power, culture is “constantly...
reproduced and contested.” Representation of culture in heritage has hegemony as its goal, as the dominant social group attempts to “universalis[e] its own cultural truths.” Steven Hoelscher (2006: 206–207) puts forward seven premises for how heritage is used in the present to understand the past. One is politics: debates about the past occur within frameworks of power. Heritage is used to validate, maintain, and push forward elite interests at the expense of the marginalized and underrepresented, producing a one-sided history. Edward Boyle (2019: 293–312) examines how heritage sites become “borders of memory” where antagonisms meet and connect. Evolving audiences challenge and overwrite stories of “memory communities.” Sites can “redress injustices of the past” as stories “are narrated by some and contested by others.” In the “symbolic space of these sites . . . the local reconciliation achieved in these communities remains there, apart from the antagonistic national narratives.”

Sara McDowell (2008: 43–44, 49) recognizes heritage as “a cultural product/resource (with social and political functions)” that validates, legitimizes, and undermines political ideologies. But forgetting is as crucial as remembering. Memorials are public conveyances of political messages, “instructing citizens what to value.” Heritage is not “all things to all people” but can be manipulated to communicate a range of narratives about relationships with the past and present. Yaniv Poria and colleagues (2003: 238–254) acknowledge heritage tourism as more than the presence of tourists at historical sites. It is also about the relationship between visitors and the space where they can “feel.” People's behavior at heritage sites is linked to their beliefs and emotions about their own identity. Atsuko Hashimoto and David Telfer (2019: 381, 396) discuss “contested geopolitical messages” conveyed by heritage sites and identify two types of visitors. Pilgrims with emotional attachments to places of memory are, over time, replaced by tourists looking for commemoration and education.
The most useful theoretical framework for this essay comes from the work of Linda Richter (2005: 257). She identifies four interrelated political issues in the development of heritage sites. First, sites reflect changing power balances as dominant historical narratives give way to revisionist views when marginalized and ignored groups are included. Second, new claimants to representation emerge, resulting in neglected histories coming to the fore. Third, the struggle over authenticity and interpretation raises questions about previously unquestioned truths as complex and ambiguous stories are sought to be told through balanced interpretation. Richter recognizes that “political power of various groups may well control not only whose interpretation and definition . . . prevails but also what will be saved or remembered at all.” Finally, heritage sites allow shameful legacies to be confronted. Tragedy can lead to education, understanding of difference, and increased tolerance. Applying these theories to the Featherston site, Richter’s concepts offer the greatest potential for understanding its evolution from the scene of a forgotten tragedy to a serene garden of remembrance.

The “Featherston incident,” as it is known, took place in 1943 at a POW camp built on the site of a World War I training camp just north of the town. About 120 New Zealanders guarded more than eight hundred Japanese soldiers and officers. The situation was replete with tension and cultural misunderstanding, as average Kiwi blokes encountered men with different concepts of national and family honor, who felt deep personal shame and guilt about being captured. Imprisonment was demeaning enough; forced labor added to the humiliation.

Despite attempts at resolution, one February morning many prisoners expressed defiance by sitting in silence on the ground, refusing to work. The guards’ tolerance reached its end. A warning shot from a pistol was followed by automatic machine-gun fire, and within minutes 49 men lay dead or dying on the compound floor. An official inquiry was held but, due to wartime sensitivities and fear of Japanese retribution, mystery was allowed to cloak the event. Rumor and suspicion festered. The loss of the ashes of the deceased added an especially unfortunate chapter to the story.

Decades later, after the camp was dismantled, an area was set aside for a travelers’ rest stop to commemorate the sacrifice of thousands who trained there during World War I. Picnic tables and commemorative plaques were installed. As relations between the two countries recovered, returning Japanese survivors proposed a memorial garden be built. This was opposed by some locals and Royal New Zealand Returned and Services Association (RSA) members for many years, but eventually a grove of 68 cherry trees was planted. Information panels and a replica prison hut have been added, and a gathering of remembrance takes place each year on the anniversary of the incident, attended by the Japanese ambassador, politicians, and local citizens.

The first of Richter’s four issues to consider in the development of heritage sites is a changing balance of power. Heritage sites no longer necessarily reflect just a “dominant establishment” view but a changing appreciation of the past and what can be learned from events previously misunderstood or even ignored. Exposed disparities and imbalances are analyzed and confronted in new ways as both tourists and locals seek to remember and commemorate the past. Those who were affected by historical events become increasingly removed as power shifts, and as time moves on. Previously marginalized groups are represented, and narratives become more inclusive. Sites become more interactive and accessible, both physically and intellectually (2005: 258–261).

This change in power is apparent in the timeline of the development of the Featherston site. In the years following the incident, those who controlled what happened at the site had little reason to memorialize the Japanese dead. The committee that designed and built the first stage of the memorial in the late 1970s was clear that it was to remember the New Zealand soldiers who had passed through the camp and scant notice would be given to the POWs. Only a “tiny,
inconspicuous” plaque and a small stand of cherry trees would commemorate the Japanese servicemen who died. Correspondence between committee member Pat Ward and former POW Tamotsu Fujita reveals that any proposal for a more prominent and distinct memorial to the Japanese was simply “unacceptable” (Ward 1977).

The idea for a memorial garden came in 1986 from survivor Toshio Adachi, who had been wounded in the incident. The Featherston RSA’s membership at the time was several hundred. Although no local veterans had been POWs of the Japanese and most had fought in the European theater rather than the Pacific, they were resentful and angry about how the Japanese had treated their POWs (Dick Smith, personal communication, Featherston RSA, 23 April 2022). For years, the decision was reviewed and voted down. Letters to the council reveal the strength of feeling: “It seems ludicrous that a memorial be erected to men who were captured and interred [sic] and in effect, mutinied, resulting in their deaths” (Hickland 1995). “I suggest to you that if the ‘Peace Garden’ is proceeded with in its present form, the council will be offering a gratuitous and crashing insult to this memory [to the Allied dead]” (Hobbs 1997). “Old diggers” were apparently “enraged” (Malo 1997). Not until those men had died could the council finally proceed with the garden (Smith, personal communication, 23 April 2022). But bitterness had not disappeared completely: the night after the 68 cherry trees were planted in 2000, some were pulled out by an unknown vandal, and were replaced.

Once the trees were growing and flowering, locals came to accept the memorial. An appreciation of cultural differences and empathy for both victims and perpetrators grew, evident in recent books and articles attempting to explain what happened. Power has shifted from those who want to forget the incident to those who seek peace and reconciliation. Both Japanese and New Zealanders have realized that healing requires an understanding of the past and an acknowledgment of the wrongs that were done.

Figure 2. Plaque at the Japanese Memorial Site at Featherston. Photo courtesy of the author.
Zealanders gather annually not only to recognize and move beyond the tragedy but also to celebrate and affirm the friendship between the two countries. As Australian High Commissioner Patricia Forsythe said at this year’s event, “It’s not about what happened in 1943; it’s about what has come out of that” (SWDC 2022).

Richter identifies as a second issue new claimants to political representation. In various contexts, these claims could be women, ethnic minorities, the poor, the working class, or enslaved people. Those who have been overlooked now increasingly take their place in our museums, galleries, and heritage sites (2005: 261–262).

The Featherston site is an excellent example. The original rest stop was intended as a memorial only to the thousands of New Zealanders who passed through the camps (Wairarapa Times Age 1975). The Japanese presence was marked only by a plaque “mounted so low that the grass can grow and hide it” (Numata Bedford 2010: 19). The large signpost cited only the World War I training camp and the twinning of Featherston with Messines in Belgium. A brief addition “recalls the World War II Japanese prisoner of war camp,” with no recognition of the deaths of 48 of those prisoners. Former POWs visited in 1986 and Japanese government envoys came to Featherston several times. Work toward reconciliation did not overcome strongly negative feelings held by influential townspeople toward the Japanese (2010: 20). The RSA also opposed a more conspicuous memorial. A cherry tree orchard like that planted at Cowra in Australia, where a similar tragedy took place in 1944, received no endorsement from locals or the New Zealand government (Nicolaidi 1999: 84).

The proposal was resurrected after a further visit, this time from a Japanese men’s choir, Chor-Farmer, which had toured Australia (including Cowra) for many years and added Featherston to its schedule for the first time in 2000. Choir members were billeted in local homes and their concert in the town’s Anzac Hall received a standing ovation. (This visit was only the first of many; tours continued every two years until disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.) The idea for a garden was once again put before the district council. Although most councillors were in favor, a compromise had to be reached over the name. This would be a “memorial,” not a “peace” garden.

Chor-Farmer’s role in developing grassroots understanding was critical. The choir’s repeated goodwill tours to Australia had gradually enabled friendships to form between former enemies. Young choir members had no direct experience of war, and their repertoire included both Japanese and Western music. They used their experiences of touring Australia to help them forge links with New Zealanders. The choir members not only were welcomed into Featherston homes but on their 2006 visit were greeted by the newly formed Featherston Gentleman Singers and the two groups performed together (Numata Bedford 2010: 24–26).

Japanese claimants to representation at the Featherston site, initially surviving POWs in the 1970s, followed by the choir, have cultivated close ties with the town’s people. This, combined with the ebbing influence of local World War II veterans, allowed the Japanese to not only have a greater presence at the site than before, in the form of traditional sakura or cherry blossoms, but also actively influence how their formerly neglected countrymen would be commemorated.

The third issue Richter identifies is about authenticity and interpretation of heritage sites. What is depicted tells as much of a story as what is left out. When analyzing heritage sites, it is as important to look at what is remembered as well as what is forgotten. Especially at sites where history is still contentious or is actively covered up and ignored, what is exhibited and displayed is politically subjective and nuanced. As time passes, efforts are made to tell the “whole truth” or give a more balanced and accurate narrative. Richter recognizes that it is not enough for the dominant power to merely include the previously marginalized but also to invite them to participate and allow their interpretation to come to the fore (2005: 262–266).
At the Featherston site, this is not yet evident. There is little interpretation of the actual event, just an information board with a brief narrative passing it off as a misunderstanding, without examination of the cultural forces and attitudes at play. There is certainly no mention of the subsequent inquiry or the loss of the ashes of the deceased. The strongest impression visitors get from the site is of the sadness of the lost lives of those 48 men far from their homes, apparent in the simplicity of the haiku, the quietness of the surrounding countryside and the rustling of those trees, whose branches now entwine. Any hint of blame for the incident and its coverup on the part of the government and military authorities has been excluded. This is not to say the display is unbalanced. Equally, no context is given for the Japanese presence at the camp, and no mention of the atrocities in the Pacific, which undoubtedly influenced the feelings and actions of those on the New Zealand side. This site is hardly difficult or confronting. The wish of those who first proposed the memorial garden to commemorate lives lost and friendships forged has been fulfilled.

Other than its location, what is exhibited at the site is not authentic in the sense that it contains nothing of the camp as it was, other than a single replica hut. The hut is open on three sides, and the walls are covered with information panels. It is almost impossible to get any sense of what life had been like for the prisoners or their guards. Virtually nothing is offered by way of a visitor “experience” of the past. A large panel depicts a map of the main World War I training camp, but nothing of the smaller camp areas (Canvas Camp, Tauherenikau Camp, and the later POW camp) on the same site. The authenticity here lies in the Japanese elements: the traditional cherry trees, the haiku, and the original memorial plaque depicted in both Japanese and English. The place has been wiped clean of any military artifacts or contentious narratives.

However, the path “lined with cherry trees, sometimes bare, but sometimes in full bloom, with peaceful rest areas on the way” fulfills the long-held Japanese wish to not forget the unfortunate experiences of war and to establish and reinforce bonds of friendship for the future (Numata Bedford 2010: 26).

Richter’s fourth and final issue is concerned with confronting shameful legacies of the past. Heritage sites focusing on death, tragedy, and atrocity are popular among tourists, less so perhaps among the locals who live near them. So-called dark tourism allows visitors to examine and learn from events others may not wish to acknowledge. Museums and exhibitions are more common at former concentration camps, prisons, and mass graves, especially those associated with war and tyrannical regimes, as changing politics and passing time allow. Not only are tragedies that are the work of foreign countries or long-gone despots being commemorated, but painful and shameful episodes on the part of local authorities and institutions are revived and explored. “Mea culpa tourism,” argues Richter (2005: 266–268), “is perhaps cathartic for the dominant group and some solace to others.”

This is partly what has happened at Featherston. There are accounts of Japanese visits to the site, particularly since the 1970s, whether former POWs, Chor-Farmer members, ambassadors and other dignitaries, or everyday tourists passing by the rest stop. In 1986, former POW Toshio Adachi returned and “conducted a one-hour memorial ceremony based on the tradition of new Shintoism . . . the solemn ceremony in which everyone prayed for the souls of the departed, humbly offering flowers there” (Ota 2013: 55).

Bill McKerrow, Featherston mayor from 1974 to 1989, wanted to ensure the POWs were not forgotten when the camp was memorialized because “you can’t run around with a chip on your shoulder all your life and I was very dedicated to helping heal a wound.” He believed “a garden and heritage park would perpetuate for future generations the wisdom and understanding gained from the experiences of the two world wars [and] . . . would signify rapprochement between former foes.” McKerrow believed the Japanese were helping New Zealanders resolve their
guilt with their sponsorship of the site. This has happened on a local level as the town’s people come to regard the Japanese as friends rather than enemies (Nicolaidi 1999: 93, 123). Indeed, it is noteworthy that despite the firm wish of the RSA that the site be merely a “memorial garden,” community members (even volunteers at the Featherston Heritage Museum) refer to it as the “peace garden” (conversations with Featherston locals and museum staff, 23–25 April 2022).

However, the Featherston site has not been used by the New Zealand authorities to confront the shameful legacy of the shooting dead of 48 unarmed POWs. There is no examination of the causes or consequences. There is no acknowledgment or apology for the incident. The fact that the victims’ ashes were lost is ignored. Although the site is a place of peaceful contemplation, its intention is to focus on commemorating lives lost and promoting tolerance and friendship, not recalling and considering the difficult cultural and political issues that culminated in the tragedy. Despite the leadership of Japanese citizens in proposing a garden and even purchasing the land it is planted on, the site was developed within the limits of what was palatable for locals, especially veterans. This is not a place of pilgrimage for New Zealanders to reckon with their own dark history.

The four issues Richter identifies are useful when considering how and why the Featherston site is portrayed and used by visitors today. The balance of power shifted away from those who wanted to forget, and new voices were allowed to participate. There is some degree of authenticity but little interpretation, which has meant the legacy of the incident has not been confronted in any meaningful way. Instead, it is seen as a place for reconciliation, where visitors can formally gather, acknowledging the past yet firmly facing the future.

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NOTE

1. It seems the number 68 includes the 48 killed in February 1943 plus other Japanese POWs who died from disease or other causes while interned at the camp.

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Shadows, Strings & Other Things
The Enchanting Theater of Puppets

During a time in which many museums have had to entirely shift to the digital realm in order to engage with the public, the website and online exhibit project Shadows, Strings & Other Things, curated by Nicola Levell and assistant curators Anna Nielsen and Erika Balcombe, presents a fascinating digital window into the art of puppetry. The website originated out of a larger project and collaboration with the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC), in which Shadows, Strings & Other Things was conceived as not only a physical exhibit of over 230 handmade puppets displayed at MOA (16 May–14 October 2019) but also a research project spanning seven modes through which visitors can experience the diverse cultural heritage of puppetry (Figure 1). This multimodal project is now accessed via the website (Figure 2) and includes a digital 3D scan of the exhibit, videos, podcasts, virtual reality, an open access gallery guide, and the publication of the book Bodies of Enchantment: Puppets from Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas (Levell 2021a).

This review focuses on the website and online exhibition but necessarily positions them within the larger project, which has been recognized for its groundbreaking approach and innovative development of a foundation for scholars interested in designing websites for experimental museum projects. The on-site and online rendering of the exhibition received the award of Outstanding Achievement in the Exhibition–Cultural Heritage category from the Canadian Museum Association in 2020, and subsequently in 2021, Levell was awarded the Michael M. Ames Prize for Innovative Museum Anthropology from the Council of Museum Anthropology.
The ShadowStringThings.com website not only lures you into the enchanted world of puppets, their makers, performances, and audiences but also provides you with a resourceful study of the creative processes behind the making of the exhibit. Although the online exhibition is centered around a digital scan or “digital twin” of the prior on-site physical exhibition, the website is much more than an exhibit walkthrough and uses the multiple modes and media (video, podcasts, catalog, etc.) to provide a captivating “front of house” and “behind the scenes” look at the art of puppetry and exhibit making. This ingenious approach plays with the idea that the magic of puppets lies in how they dance between their onstage animation and their enactment by the hidden puppeteer—with the website acting as the alluring portal that reconnects these material and immaterial, real and imaginary worlds of both puppetry and exhibit-making. By also exploring the work of the curators and designers whose efforts behind the scenes brought the exhibition to life, the website animates a complex and often unseen network of people and things that are part of museum work but are never visible within the museum gallery. Levell’s decision to digitally materialize this creative aspect of the project provides an important model for curators who
similarly want to use the digital realm to unpack for audiences the processual aspects of making exhibits. This facet of the website and online exhibit also emphasizes the performative nature of museum work—celebrating how the museum gallery can be a space where objects come to life through storytelling—with the website also acting as an oral history archive for this process.

By taking advantage of the range of media that *Shadows, Strings & Other Things* provides, including podcasts and videos, you will gain intriguing insights into the world of puppetry, such as why the puppeteers behind Punch and Judy are referred to as “professors,” as well as the origins of the term punch line. You will also discover how “water puppeteers” in Vietnam wear full body waders to prevent rheumatism as they stand immersed for hours during each performance. In effect, the digitized exhibit and carefully curated videos and podcasts lift a curtain to reveal the inner workings behind puppeteers and their art, as well as what it takes to reimagine a puppetry exhibition in the virtual realm.

**Enter Center Stage**

You are welcomed into the website *Shadows, Strings & Other Things* through a 3D gallery map and a digital 3D Matterport scan of the MOA on-site exhibition. Your first encounter at the entrance is a breathtaking 12-foot-tall First Nations puppet called Meh, whose name translates as “grandpa” or elder (Levell 2019: 37). Meh is the outcome of a collaboration between the Mortal Coil Performance Society and Tsatsu Stalqayu (a multigenerational Coast Salish dance group). Meh’s arms are raised in the Indigenous Northwest Coast gesture of welcome such that this “positioning and pose were in accordance with the territorial protocol of local First Nations” so “visitors to MOA are welcomed to the traditional, ancestral and unceded land of the hәn, qәmin, aәm-speaking Musqueam peoples” (personal communication, 2021).

You move into the gallery space through an entryway with large, black curtains held back by gold cords that emphasize the theatrical nature of the displays awaiting inside. String lights hang from the ceiling creating a carnivalesque ambience, with each section of the exhibition revealing differently textured and designed flooring and lighting that highlight each specific genre of puppetry (string, shadow, rod, hand, and stop motion). Playful wall graphics using the hands of puppeteers portray a feeling of wonder and childlike curiosity. Once in the darkened gallery, you are irresistibly drawn to luminous stages and vitrines that glow with the soft stage lighting that is used to indicate to the audience that the show is about to commence. As you move around the gallery, you encounter a wide array of brightly colored puppets, some are gilded and eye-catching, while others are suspended as if caught mid-flight and mid-performance.

Using the 3D map digital walkthrough and navigation tools, you can tour the galleries, gliding through them also as if in flight, alighting where you chose to pause and take in the detailed artistry of shadow puppets or to peek at majestic stages crowded with vibrant casts of puppets dressed in resplendent attire (Figure 2). The 3D walkthrough is designed in a manner like Google Maps Street View, but by hovering over small colored circles, you can also enlarge and read the wall texts. Levell describes how these digital labels differed from those in the on-site gallery, as the digital ones had to be redesigned specifically for the online exhibit: “They were radically edited (to reduce the word count), photographs were removed and replaced with cut-out ‘icon’ puppets, thereby making them accessible and readable for the Matterport scan” (2021b: 38). This decision elevates the online exhibit above the many gallery 3D scans for which label copy is not readable. In addition to accessing exhibit texts, the benefit of the high-resolution 3D scan is that it provides you with generous zooming abilities to explore details in the displays that otherwise would be absent. Beneath the portal to the 3D scan are five-minute mini tours via YouTube
videos that are narrated by Levell and give a more in-depth guide to exploring the exhibition. A playful “Puppet Hide & Seek” game—which is like a treasure hunt for young viewers—is also provided to help children look for and connect directly with specific items in the online exhibition.

There is not a fixed or prescribed order that users must follow to experience the 3D exhibition model; however, the gallery is organized by puppetry typologies with the two theatrical stages situated closest to the entrance dedicated to the string and shadow puppets. Beyond these are hand and rod puppets, after which the visitor reaches the most recently developed puppetry art—the stop-motion stage. Rich red curtains pulled back to the sides with golden cords grace each stage, and gold clamshell footlights illuminate the puppets, with the inclusion of theater chairs for the accompanying videos, evoking classical theater design and setting the stage for an overall playful, theatrical aesthetic to the exhibition.

All aspects of the online exhibit are rendered remarkably well in the digital model, giving a whimsical feeling to the virtual space, with each stage catching your eye and holding your attention. The creatively designed zig-zag hallway created by the theater walls also keep your senses sharp, as you move from stage to stage, hall to hall, maintaining strong visual interest without overwhelming or confusing you. Levell has also added a clever analogy to the “front of house” and “behind the scenes” structure by providing a display of puppets behind each stage, shown as they would be when stored and waiting for their cue to join the others on stage. With these behind the curtain vignettes, you are also provided with further texts that give further context and explanation of each puppet tradition.

Another experimental aspect of the website and digital exhibit is the use of virtual reality. If visitors have the newest version of the Oculus Quest VR gaming system or other similar headsets...
with controllers, the digital version of the exhibition can be viewed in VR for a fuller immersion than the base 3D model. Repeated attempts made to access and load the VR exhibition with an older Oculus model failed, however, and the newer more compatible models can be priced at $300 or more. While the ability to experience the exhibition in VR is a great idea, this reality is probably inaccessible to many, leaving the 3D model the realistic option for most visitors. Despite this setback, the online 3D scan of the exhibition and associated media makes the all-around experience a highly rewarding one, nonetheless.

**Spotlight**

There are puppet characters that come to life via the website that not only are memorable but transcend the screen and quickly find a home in your heart—revealing that the intimate joy of puppetry is not lost in the digital realm. One such character is the Garbage Monster from Turkish puppeteer Cengiz Özek, whom you can watch via one of the YouTube videos. The shadow puppeteer in this performance uses a clever layering of different puppets and props to allow the Garbage Monster to swallow boots and bottles to the delight of an audible audience of children, whose laughter you can hear as the objects are seen to go down the monster’s gullet and into its stomach. There are magical scenes of an underwater world with schools of fish and turtles who swim across the stage. In the finale, the Garbage Monster swallows a drunken fisherman who had thrown his bottle into the water and awoken the monster. The fisherman’s final moments inside the monster end the performance via a clever shift to a closing scene, revealing what it might look like from the inside of the belly of a beast.

Another highlight is the behind-the-scenes video taken during one of Professor Richard Coombs’s Punch and Judy shows in which Punch and the crocodile fight over a long link of sausages. The charm here is Coombs himself, and you discover how this puppeteer must work two characters at once, which requires each hand to operate two personae independently from the other in terms of speed, voice, tone, and style. Quite literally, one hand does not know what the other is doing—a saying that must come from the puppet world. With this intimate behind-the-scenes viewpoint, you find that this art of hand puppetry must be like having one hand dancing the waltz while the other does the rumba. The artistry and skill of Coombes takes center stage, and he becomes the mesmerizing magic of the show.

There is also a video of a puppet show from Sri Lanka in which the head of the dancing puppet in traditional dress has the side-to-side motion characteristic of this kind of traditional dance. While the puppet and her movements are transfixing, a close-up of the puppeteer working with her behind the scenes is an equally enthralling partner to the show. The video exposes the puppeteer’s feet graced with bells and dancing along with the puppet (Figure 3). This perspective helps the viewer understand that while a curtain separates puppet and puppeteer, the dance between the two is seamless: they are inextricably linked with one becoming the other. This brings to mind critical questions about agency, animacy, and the dynamics between people as objects and objects as people (Gell 1998; Gosden 2005; Strathern 1999) especially within the digital realm (Isaac 2022). In this absorbing video, however, it is not about an analytical inquiry that separates the two but the ways in which these are experienced together, and where the lines between the two are blurred.

Another highlight is the stop-motion section of the exhibit, which allows you to see how artists use film to create fantastic illusions, such as puppets breathing warm air into a cold winter night, as can be seen in Amanda Strong’s (2019) remarkable stop-motion short film *Biidaaban* (Figure 4). The smooth flow of a thousand well-executed stop-motion shots allows audiences to
forget the role of the artist, and a team of hands meticulously controlling every moving piece, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. Interestingly, the stop-motion stage stands out from the others—just as the technology behind this kind of animation is in itself rather distinct and kept hidden from its audiences. Unlike other puppetry forms in the exhibition, stop motion wholly hinges on photographic and video technology. In the exhibition, the stop-motion stage does not contain the same theatrical elements as the others: there is a bench but no classic theater chairs, no red velvet curtain with golden cords, no clamshell lights. We are reminded that these performances take place not in a theater but in a mediated studio. While puppeteers are literally

Figure 3. Screen capture of the Saranga Puppet Troupe, Sri Lanka. From “Strings, Stage Exhibition Videos.” Image courtesy of Nicola Levell and the Museum of Anthropology at UBC.

Figure 4. Screen capture of Amanda Strong’s Biidaaban as hosted on the exhibit website through YouTube, showing the puppet’s “breath” against the cold night. Image courtesy of Nicola Levell and the Museum of Anthropology at UBC.
joined to their puppets via strings, stop motion is animation via recorded movement—the audience only sees what happens after the artist has removed themselves. In another of Strong’s (2017) stop-motion films, *Four Faces of the Moon: Canada’s Dark Colonial Past*, she uses an intersection of past and present trauma to address what has been lost and what has been retained by Indigenous people over time. Her films not only master but poignantly embody this art form.

**Playbill**

The website for *Shadows, Strings & Other Things* also operates as an educational hub for research on puppetry. There are a wide range of downloadable materials, such as a PDF booklet of the exhibition (42 pages; 58 color images), which highlights the voices of puppet makers and puppeteers whose artistic works and practices were acquired, commissioned, or loaned for the exhibition. Strong graphic design elements from designer Cody Rocko mirror those from the on-site exhibition and depict puppets suspended by strings that go beyond the limits of the page, integrating them into the metaphorical exhibit themes about the liminal space between puppet and puppeteer (Figure 1).

Podcasts are also used to explain the union between the on-site and online versions of the exhibition. In these Levell introduces herself as the curator in charge of “all things material,” and Anna Nielsen as the assistant curator in charge of “all things digital.” These “take you behind the scenes to meet with the creative individuals who helped make the exhibition,” including the exhibition designer Skooker Broome and an exhibition team that includes Erika Balcombe, who, along with Nielsen, are graduate students working with Levell in museum anthropology—showing how the exhibition also proved to be successful as a research program for UBC students (Levell and Nielsen 2020a, 2020b). Other team members include the manager for fabrication, Kate Melkert, and Gerry Larson, who provided audiovisual design. These podcast conversations reinforce how the physical and virtual exhibitions are inextricably linked and at the same time exist independently. This also helps communicate to the visitor that developing the virtual exhibition comes with its own unique aspects and challenges that differentiated it from the physical exhibit, thereby providing unique lessons for scholars interested in these kinds of multimodal digital projects (for critical insight into the process of curating the virtual exhibit, see Levell 2021b).

The video section is one of the most culturally diverse and includes 18 archival and contemporary audiovisual clips from independent filmmakers and organizations around the world. These provide an ethnographically curated showcase of puppetry and behind-the-scenes work of artists and traditions and serve as case studies for interested students. Moreover, these videos are in a diverse range of languages with subtitles, thereby opening a much-needed global view on puppetry that considers the practice beyond how it is understood in the English language. As Levell has pointed out, the exhibit was also designed to rethink the conventional focus that has been on European and Asian puppets, and she actively sought out and included puppet traditions and concepts from Africa, as well as Indigenous communities of the Americas—especially from communities that are part of the Vancouver area and traditional territories of the Musqueam peoples. The vast range of audiovisual clips from different cultures also ask the viewer to resituate their prior understanding of puppets as entertainment and consider the spiritual and philosophical aspects in which many of these traditions are grounded. As a result, these videos, podcasts, and educational resources provide a fascinating window into not only puppets but also the cultural values and knowledge systems that animate them.
Exit Stage Left

A website and online virtual exhibition of this detail and magnitude prompts the question of what it means to have “visited” it. Neither of us was able to travel to see the now-dismantled on-site exhibition, instead exploring Shadows, Strings & Other Things through the project dedicated website. The attention to detail across the online exhibition and digital 3D scan of the galleries and the myriad of digital resources, however, left us feeling we had experienced key aspects of the original exhibition. Moreover, if you spend time exploring all the multiple integrated facets, the website reveals itself as this layered and complex research project that also interrogates what it means to be a digital exhibit. As Levell said, the 3D scan once accompanied by the myriad resources became a “digital twin-no-more.” What began for Levell “as an attempt to capture the aesthetics and atmosphere of an exhibition and extend its public lifespan” evolved into an ongoing research project (2021a: 39). Moreover, Levell (2019) also fittingly argues that the digital version of the exhibition is “not only a legacy, it’s a catalyst . . . a catalyst for creating an awareness and interest in puppetry."

Before viewing this website and online exhibit, we had not experienced a digital museum project that has so elegantly and artistically succeeded in spanning the multimodal platform approach (digital walkthrough, podcasts, video, exhibit catalog). Shadows, Strings & Other Things does this in a way that provides a critical and theoretically engaged lens on the relationship between tangible and intangible cultural heritage and pushes past the conventional gallery walls to open up exhibit-making, setting the standard for future multimodal museum anthropology projects. According to Levell, this approach was designed to interrogate “the artificial boundaries between tangible and intangible cultural heritage, material and digital exhibitions, inanimate and animate bodies or, more generally, the ontology of things/belongings/beings and their relation to story work and the imagination.” Arguably, the most significant move to decolonize institutional structures and representational practices was the inclusion and foregrounding of First Nations puppetry and the presence of first voices. World puppetry exhibitions and related catalogs “have tended to focus on Asian and/or European traditions and overlook Africa and the Americas, especially Indigenous traditions” (personal correspondence, 2021).

Shadows, Strings & Other Things takes advantage of its online habitation with a wide array of media that distinguishes and enhances its inherently digital nature, offering a window through which to experience the animacy of puppets and their makers. As a result, the website, online exhibition, and larger project take advantage of the digital format by paying homage to the tangible world of puppets and, at the same time, evoking the intangible aspects—such as the relationships between puppeteer and puppet, curators and designers. In this way, it adroitly brings to life a network of relationships that are not normally visible within a museum gallery, setting an important precedent for future curators interested in revealing to viewers what is behind the making of an exhibition. This aspect also emphasizes how museum exhibitions are in and of themselves performances, with the intangible aspects not seen by the visitor but which, if made visible, enhance the experience and understanding of who is pulling whose strings.

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REFERENCES

1. The virtual exhibit can be viewed at https://www.shadowstringthings.com.
2. We have also learned that the virtual reality features of the online exhibit can be accessed and used via cell phones and a Google Cardboard VR viewing device.
3. Videos can be found at https://www.shadowstringthings.com/videos.

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Levell, Nicola. 2021a. Bodies of Enchantment: Puppets from Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas. Vancouver: Figure 1 Publishing.