Afterword

The Work of Culture, Heritage, and Musealized Spaces in “Unprecedented Times”

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Writing at the midpoint of 2020, it has become cliché to say we are living in unprecedented times as the world copes with a confluence of events and challenges near cataclysmic proportions—the COVID-19 pandemic, civic unrest, social and political upheavals, and disrupted economies. In these times, what should be the work of culture, heritage, and musealized spaces and those that study them? I reflect on the articles in the special section, which stand as examples of engaged research and scholarship that seek to make visible troubled histories and presents, and to amplify voices that have for too long been silenced or ignored. Such visibility work surfaces what does and does not have precedent, what has and has not changed, and what is truly different and revolutionary. The articles draws on historical, comparative, and global perspectives to enrich knowledge gained from firsthand observation and engagement with local communities. Using Donna Haraway’s concept of “tentacular thinking,” I argue that we need not only to shed light on difficult chapters in our histories, but also to offer tools for understanding, guidance, and thoughtful actions in the present.

■ **KEYWORDS:** culture, heritage, musealized spaces, museum anthropology, tentacular thinking, visibility work

As I write this afterword in mid-2020, I can only think that it has become clichéd to say that we are living in “unprecedented times.” The COVID-19 pandemic, civic unrest, social and political upheavals, and economies in a nosedive have all contributed to the present troubles.¹ In this new era, what work should culture, heritage, and musealized spaces and those that study them do?

While the articles in this special section do not directly address current events, they speak to their underlying causes and fallout—that is, legacies of slavery and European colonialism; institutionalized racism and violence; and the structural inequalities of the capitalist world system. The articles stand as examples of engaged research and scholarship that seek to bring to light troubled histories and presents, and to raise the profile of voices that have for too long been silenced or ignored. Such visibility work looks at what is and is not given precedent, what has and has not changed, and what is actually different and revolutionary. They show how ethnographically grounded research informed by a historical perspective helps temporalize the events

and challenges of “unprecedented times” and contextualize them beyond their “presentness” (Harvey 2001).

As much as the authors bring “voices out of the dark,” they equally show why the work and content of museums and heritage spaces matter by critically examining processes of musealization and “heritageization” (Harvey 2001). Especially important is their illumination of *how* they matter *differently* across time, place, publics, and people (individual and collective). This is clearly evident in the case studies from Kathleen M. Adams and Hugo DeBlock on the shifting meanings, values, and approaches to the care and representation of ancestor figures once alienated from their homelands. Both Adams and DeBlock provide fascinating accounts of how localized and alternative curatorial practices contrast to conventional, “operational museology” (Shelton 2013). Their cases from Indonesia and Vanuatu draw attention to how “the museum is an inventive, globally and locally *translated* form, no longer anchored to its modern origins in Europe” (Clifford 2019: 109 *italics in the original*).

As Adams recommends, such examples “expand our cross-cultural understanding of museum forms and practices, thereby contributing to the broader agenda of comparative museology.” Cross-cultural comparison, as Laura Nader has pointed out, is “particularly useful in illuminating processes that may otherwise remain invisible” (2018: 70). Paula Mota Santos extends the comparison to the transnational in her analysis of differences between exhibitions at the Municipal Museum in Lagos, Portugal, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, in their approaches to representing the history of slavery and the memorialization of enslaved peoples.

The use of comparison accentuates how there is not one universal museology but a world filled with diverse museological approaches and expressions (Isaac et al. 2019; Kreps 2003, 2020). The diversification of museum forms and practices along with processes of musealization and heritageization is one of the most significant developments that has been taking place in the museum world over the past few decades (Isaac et al. 2019; Kreps 2020; McCarthy 2019). Diversification, along with globalization, decolonization, and indigenization, has led to profound changes in what we now think of as “the museum.”

Santos and DeBlock, in their introduction to this issue use the debates over a proposed new museum definition that took place at the 2019 International Council of Museums (ICOM) General Conference in Kyoto, Japan, as testimony for the need for change and the difficulty that such change entails. Proponents of a new definition argued that the current ICOM museum definition (below) no longer adequately captures the diversity of museums around the world and the great variety of work museums do:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (ICOM 2020)

The alternative put to the vote at the Extraordinary General Assembly was more inclusive and much broader in scope, and thus too vague for many.² It was also replete with “rights-based discourse” that has come to inform museum and cultural work in many quarters (Coombe and Weiss 2015; Lynch 2019), including that described by the authors in this special section:

Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present they hold artifacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary well-being. (ICOM 2020)

As Santos and DeBlock note, the vote was postponed because agreement could not be reached on the form and content of the new definition. Difficulty in defining the museum is not new. Back in 1977, Kenneth Hudson, the renowned museum scholar and social historian, in his book *Museums for the 1980s: A Survey of World Trends*, submitted that it had become increasingly difficult to define exactly what a museum is because museums, as social institutions, despite their inherently conservative nature, change:

One could summarize the change by saying that museums are no longer considered to be merely storehouses or agents for the preservation of a country's cultural and natural heritage, but powerful instruments of education in the broadest sense. What a museum is attempting to achieve has become more important than what it is. This trend . . . makes the definition of a museum increasingly difficult, and perhaps increasingly pointless. (Hudson 1977: 1)

ICOM has formulated a number of museum definitions since its inception in 1946. The current definition (adopted into ICOM Statutes in 2007) is a revision of the 1974 version that shifted focus away from the concept of the museum as a storehouse of collections to the idea that museums exist first and foremost to serve society and its development (Kreps 2020: 12).

While opinions vary on the need to revise the ICOM museum definition or to have one “authorized” (Smith 2006) definition period, much attention has been given in the scholarly and professional literature to why and how museums change. This literature is essential because it provides deeper understandings behind the processes of change, their sources and outcomes, what from the past does and does not define us now, and what future directions we might take (Kreps 2020). The authors in this special section contribute to this literature by considering the ways in which internal dynamics plus external social, political, economic, intellectual, and cultural pressures push museum and heritage spaces in new and alternative directions.

Although change can be seen as relatively constant in the museum and heritage worlds, the pace of change has accelerated in recent years, and even months and weeks. The current wave of pulling down monuments to slavery in the United Kingdom and to Confederate, Civil War “heroes” in the United States (in the wake of mass protests over the murder of George Floyd and against police brutality) underscores how some people’s “heritage” is another community’s symbol of oppression and source of historical trauma.

Gone are the days when museums can hide behind the pretense of political neutrality and objectivity; ignore protests against corporate sponsorship; and unabashedly reject claims for the return of cultural patrimony as the self-appointed guardians of humanity’s “shared heritage.” Indeed, the actions and interventions of such groups as Decolonize This Place, Occupy this Place, The Future Museum Project, Change the Museum, Idle No More, and Black Lives Matter have challenged museums to acknowledge and actively respond to the legacies of colonialism, racism, and injustice embedded in their edifices, collections, curatorial practices, and disciplinary canons. These movements and the dramatic events of these “unprecedented times” lay bare the politics of culture, history, heritage, memory, and their representation in institutions of public culture. While many of these movements have been in motion for a decade or more, what is unprecedented is the speed with which they have gained momentum and achieved actual results over a relatively short period of time.

In the introduction to the edited volume, *The Contemporary Museum: Shaping Museums for the Global Now*, Simon Knell contends that the contemporary museum "sets its agenda according to the peculiar conditions of today . . . In this today, our lives are oriented towards the contemporary like never before. This is the result of the technological revolution that turned the Internet into the primary platform for social interaction" (2019: 1). The digital revolution, for Knell, has played a key role in making "the global contemporary," which is defined as a "sense of living in a globally connected world that is preoccupied with the thin slice of time that is contemporary" (2019: 2). Barriers to global communications since the 1990s have given way to immediate access to information and events via Facebook and Twitter and other social media platforms; and the building of relationships and alliances among people no longer temporally and spatially separated. Not only organized activists but also ordinary citizens have been empowered and emboldened by their mobile phones, which allow them to record and share what they witness on a global scale.

The museum in the global contemporary *zeitgeist* is now being subjected to unprecedented scrutiny that extends beyond the Institutional Critique of social practice and relational artists of past decades (Marstine 2017). Kristy Robertson points out, in her important and remarkably timely book *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, and Museums*,

that museums are targeted for many reasons. And in turn, museums engage with protest in many ways. Sometimes they resist it; sometimes they welcome it. In the case studies in this book, museums apologize for their actions toward protesters, they organize exhibitions to welcome activists in their halls, they rehang permanent collections in response to critique, they help to protect artists whose shows have been censored, they work hard to open archives to various parties whose histories are contained therein. And on the other hand, museums (sometimes the same museums) work closely with the oil and gas sector against activist demands, maintain parochial relationships with narrowly defined norms of settler nationalism, refuse the repatriation of certain objects, and actively rebuff and repudiate critiques. Museums are multifaceted, and it is precisely the contradictory nature of museums that makes them such tempting objects of study. (Robertson 2019: xvi)

The "instances" described in this section explicate the complexities, nuances, and contradictions layered into museums and heritage spaces, and the necessity for their study and critical analysis. The authors help us comprehend why these spaces have become pivotal arenas for the expression of "culturalized politics" and the multiple registers in which "culture" is constructed, interpreted, and deployed.

Since the 1980s, anthropologists and other scholars have been examining the rise in a "consciousness of culture" (Breidenbach and Nyiri 2009: 9) and the importance placed on "having a culture" (Handler 1985:192). The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins asserted, in the early 1990s, that "cultural self-consciousness," especially among "imperialism's erstwhile victims," was one of the more remarkable phenomena of world history in the late twentieth century (1993: 3). The deliberate use of culture, its discovery, invention, and reinforcement, or what he termed "culturalism" (1993: 4), had by then become normative as a means of gaining recognition of a distinctive way of life and relative difference. Joana Breidenbach and Pal Nyiri in their book *Seeing Culture Everywhere from Genocide to Consumer Habits*, suggest that "today's world is a world shaped by a consciousness of culture that penetrates everyday life as well as matters of the state in an unprecedented way . . . Culture—or rather cultural difference—is now held to be the main explanation for the way the human world functions" (2009: 9). Concurrently, scholars have been exploring the ways in which "cultural technologies" like museums, heritage sites, and exhibitions (Bennett 1994:127) are enlisted for the formation and assertion of identity and as

instruments of empowerment (Crooke 2007; Fuller 1992; Golding and Modest 2013; Karp 1992; Watson 2007).

Cristiana Bastos unpacks the complexities of these phenomena and the contradictions of musealizing processes in her analysis of the Hawai'i Plantation Village's representational strategies. She astutely shows how its focus on a "collective heritage composed of multiple, distinct identities empowers the different community members," yet at the same time reinforces and legitimates the prevailing narrative of Hawai'i as a multiethnic racial paradise, an image that emerged in the 1920s. She points out that while the Village's representational strategy does not ignore the "discipline of violence" endured by plantation laborers, this image, which has helped expunge "the racialized hierarchies that structured the labor force," persists. Given our current reckonings with the legacies of slavery and the violence of racism, Bastos's article is a timely provocation. It reveals how certain economic and social structures produce "race" as "a cognitive tool that organizes difference among human groups," similar to how "culture," also a cognitive tool, has been used as an "explanation for the way the human world functions" (Breidenbach and Nyiri 2009: 9). Certainly, as Bastos and other authors show, spotlighting "culture" can obscure other important forces at work such as politics and economics.

Rachel Giraudo's socially and politically relevant research on "cannabis culture" is yet another example of the many permutations that the concepts of culture, heritage, and the museum can take in service to a cause—in this case, the legitimization and destigmatizing of cannabis and its users. She notes that academic researchers have only recently shown interest in cannabis as a topic of study, and most of the historical and cultural work on it has been carried out by activists and advocates. This "micro-level" or "heritage from below" (Eckersley and Corsane 2014) speaks to the utility of the concepts and "museum-like practices" outside academic and professional museum worlds, which also have only recently begun to be taken seriously by scholars (Candlin 2016).

Giraudo's use of the term "deviant heritage" signals the proliferation of diverse "heritages" in step with the emergence of diverse museologies.³ Just as it is true for "the museum," this tendency has made it increasingly difficult to define what heritage is. Over 20 years ago, David Lowenthal declared that "heritage today all but defies definition" (1998: 94). David Harvey has raised the question of "whether we really need a tight definition at all" (2001: 320).

The articles in this section are exemplary of the kind of visibility work being done in museum anthropology today. They not only make visible "voices out of the dark," but also the range and variety of museum-like forms and practices employed in the process. The articles are characteristic of a methodology that draws on historical, comparative, and global perspectives to enrich knowledge gained from firsthand observation and engagement with local communities (Kreps 2020). Nowadays, museum anthropology, like anthropology in general, is no longer confined to one locale (Hannerz 2010). Rather, it is more often "multisited," and both local and global in orientation. This approach helps fill a gap in the scholarship on museums identified some time ago.

In the introduction to *Museum Frictions: Public Culture/Global Transformation*, Corinne Kratz and Ivan Karp argue that "increasing international connections and global orientations is one of the major trends in museum and heritage practice to appear in recent decades, yet, the workings and implications of such trends have gone relatively unexamined" (2006: 4). They go on to say that neither has much attention been given to how museums have managed the often-contradictory pushes and pulls, tensions, and frictions generated by globalizing processes and "from the history of museums, which is sedimented in their organization, collections, and exhibitions" (2006: 5). Karp and Kratz came up with the idea of "museum frictions" to

shift attention toward the ongoing complex of social processes and transformations that are generated by and based in museums, museological processes that can be multi-sited and ramify far beyond museum settings. “Museum frictions” incorporates the idea of the museum as a varied and often changing set of practices, processes, and interactions; this sense of the museum as a social technology is a crucial addition to considering the museum as an institution of public culture and the different meanings and histories of the concept of the museum. (Kratz and Karp 2006: 2)

The authors herein draw our attention to how museum and cultural work can be enmeshed in, connected to, and shaped by wider networks and globalizing processes. In Santos’s case, we see how present-day projects are the outgrowth of connections and globalizing processes that are centuries old (Kratz and Karp 2006). In equal measure, the authors expose the “frictions” that emerge in musealizing and heritage-making processes and the ways in which variously positioned actors creatively make museum and heritage-like spaces work for them.

Certainly, in these “unprecedented times,” our task as museum scholars, practitioners, cultural workers, and activists is to engage in what Donna Haraway calls “tentacular thinking”—a mode of thinking that involves tracking threads and connections, finding their tangles and patterns, what does and does not connect us, and what is the same and not the same at all (2016: 13). Tentacular thinking not only allows us to shed light on difficult chapters in history, their entanglements, and their consequences, but also to offer tools for understanding, guidance, and thoughtful actions in the present.

Activism for social justice, human and civil rights, and the environment has been on the rise in the museum, arts, and cultural sectors. In tandem, a notable body of literature has been appearing that documents the trend (Apsel and Sodaro 2020; Chynoweth et al. 2020; Gonzales 2020; Holtorf et al. 2019; Janes 2009; Janes and Sandell 2019; Marstine 2017; Message 2014; Robertson 2019; Sandell 2017). Increasingly, we are recognizing that public and community engagement is not enough. We are now called upon to stand in *solidarity* with the historically oppressed and those fighting for their rights *on their own terms* (Lynch 2011, 2019; Lynch and Alberti 2010).

The work of culture, heritage, and musealized spaces and those that study them is multi-pronged and ever-evolving. As the authors in this special section show, part of this work entails “staying with the trouble,” to borrow Haraway’s words, and “to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places” (2016: 1). Surely, in these turbulent, uncertain, and unprecedented times, this task is needed more than ever.

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NOTES

1. Of course, added to this list could be environmental disasters brought on by global warming in the form of devastating fires, floods, and “super” storms.
2. I was present at the Extraordinary General Assembly to listen-in on final debates, which lasted close to eight hours. Overall, it appeared that most delegates agreed that it was time for a new museum definition. Disagreement tended to center on the process behind the formulation of the new definition, in addition to its form and content. Many delegates believed that the proposed definition was too long and that it read more like a mission statement than a definition. Many delegates were also uncomfortable with the heavy emphasis on what they interpreted as a human rights agenda. They feared this emphasis would not sit well with their ministries of culture, whose policies and ideologies they were obliged to follow.
3. For example, see Turnbridge and Ashworth (1996) on “dissonant heritage” and Macdonald (2009) on “difficult heritage.”

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