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Let the objects speak: online museums and indigenous cultural heritage

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to contribute to the critical debate about curatorial practices and how museums can be transformed into cultural centres that are 'decolonising' their objects whilst simultaneously providing social agency to marginalised groups such as indigenous peoples. An exploration of new media theory, installation art and online museums allows us to examine to what extent an online museum might provide scope to further the debate about how indigenous heritage can be displayed and curated. Through a case study of a hypothetical online museum of the *San's* culture, we theorise and explore in what shape and form an online museum might play a role in the communication, support, and safeguarding of the culture and heritage of the *San*. While online museums may, and have, taken various forms, we argue that a digitised reproduction of three dimensional objects within virtual rooms is not a valuable method for achieving inclusivity. Instead, inspired by new media art, we engage with a new way of classifying material which allows interactivity and communication between the visitor and curator (i.e. indigenous peoples) through the creation of both the database of, and the interface(s) to, the material archived in the online indigenous museum.

Introduction

The call for museums to become more inclusive is not a new one. Ever since the American civil rights movement in the 1960s voiced an open dissatisfaction towards

museums for only serving a cultural elite, museums have been criticised for reflecting only 'white' values when displaying and interpreting 'non-western' art (Jones, 1993; Barringer and Flynn, 1998; Simpson, 2001). There is

a growing body of literature that argues that museums have a social role to fulfil within society (see e.g. Pearce, 1994; Jones, 1993; Barringer & Flynn, 1998; Simpson, 2001; Stanley, 2007). For example, a collection of scholarly essays in *Museums, Society and Inequality* (Sandell, 2002) explore to what extent museums can, and are, willing to fulfil their new role of social agency to influence and affect society in order to combat social inequality. The authors illustrate, through critically engaging with a diverse set of case studies and theoretical frameworks, how museums can (i) impact positively on the lives of disadvantaged and/or marginalised individuals; (ii) act as a catalyst for social regeneration; (iii) become vehicles for empowerment and (iv) contribute towards a more equitable society. In particular, the debate about the responsibility of museums to respect indigenous peoples' rights (Kelly and Gordon, 2002; Butts, 2002) has caught our attention on the basis of our previous research experience with regard to the protection of the tangible and intangible heritage of the *San* in Southern Africa¹ (Martin and Vermeylen, 2005; Vermeylen, 2007; Vermeylen, 2008a; Vermeylen et al, 2008; Vermeylen, 2008b).

This paper contributes to the critical debate about curatorial practices and how museums can be transformed into cultural centres that are 'decolonising' their objects, whilst simultaneously providing social agency to marginalised groups such as indigenous peoples. In this sense, our paper builds further upon the body of literature that started roughly with Peter Vergo's (1989) new museology theory in the late 1980s which called for the transformation of the museum from a site of worship to a site that engages with multiple discourses and critical reflections. Acknowledging the recent literature on new and democratised museum practices in

general and in particular the concept of indigenous museums (Stanley, 2007), our contribution extends somewhat beyond the conventional disciplinary borders of museum studies: we incorporate in our paper a combination of theoretical insights from new media theory (Manovich, 2001; 2003; Vesna, 2007) and practical insights gained from our own work with the *San* (Vermeylen, 2007; Vermeylen 2008a) and analysing artworks which question previous curatorial practices ('*Warte Mal! Prostitution After the Velvet Revolution*'; '*Pasifika Styles*'; '*Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women*'; '*Public Secrets*'; '*Need_X_Change*'; '*Palabras*')² This exploration of installation art, online museums and new media art allows us to examine to what extent an online museum might provide scope to further the debate about how indigenous heritage can be displayed and curated with a particular focus on how the voices of indigenous peoples' can be more prominently embedded in museum and cultural heritage practices.

The paper is structured as follows. We start with a review of the remit of the indigenous museum. We then 'zoom in' for a critical look at the role of objects in such museums. Subsequently we examine the premise of online museums and explore what role they can play in the communication, support and safeguarding of the voices, history and lived experiences of indigenous peoples.

New museum practices

Traditional methods of displaying indigenous heritage are now regarded with deep suspicion and resentment by indigenous peoples (Simpson, 2001). Within the context of museum practice, a number of related issues such as the appropriation, ownership and repatriation of culture together with the treatment of sensitive and sacred

materials and the stereotyping of the identity of indigenous peoples have been increasingly questioned over the last two decades (Carter, 1994; Simpson, 2001). In response to these criticisms, museum practitioners became increasingly aware that not only have they a duty of care to an object, responsibility also extends to other social functions of the museum and in particular lies in its relationship with people (Besterman, 2006). As a result, for the last two decades significant changes have taken place in the social interaction between museums and indigenous peoples as can be illustrated in the context of Canadian and Australian museum practices.

The catalyst that made Canadian museums look at themselves was an exhibition in Calgary, Alberta in 1988 – *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* (Gibbons, 1997). Despite the fact that six curators were involved in organising the exhibition, none of them was of native origin. The omission of the native voice in the exhibition generated a debate about ownership and voice. Eventually, in 1992, a document – *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships between Museums and First Peoples* – was published outlining how museums should engage more inclusively with their audiences and significant 'others'. One of the major guidelines in the report was the appointment of First Nations' members to museum boards and their closer involvement as either co-curators or curators when organising exhibitions.

The *Crocodile Hole* meeting in Kimberley where Aboriginal elders debated their cultural practices can be identified as the turning point in Australian museum practice leading to the publishing of the *Report of the State Task Force for Museums Policy* in 1992 and the development of the policy document *Previous Possessions, New Obligations: Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* in 1993 (Galla, 1994; 2008). The debate about the closer involvement of indigenous peoples in museum practices has since further evolved, focusing on new challenges such as exploring indigenous peoples' histories, heritage and identity from an indigenous perspective. This to the extent that, for example, the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington now even acknowledges the importance of cultural over object preservation (Shelton, 2006), an issue that will be further discussed later in this paper.

Indeed, it is now almost common practice for museums to establish close relationships and collaboration projects with indigenous peoples. The diversity of case studies is just too vast to discuss in detail

in this paper (Carter, 1994; Simpson, 2001; Butts, 2002; Kelly & Gordon, 2002; Stanley, 2007). It is important to highlight, though, that while many museums must be applauded, like Casey (2003) does, for their efforts to include indigenous peoples in their museum practices (as artists, curators or by returning sacred objects to the source communities) the need for facilitating agency and dialogue remains high as long as indigenous peoples' lives are *reduced to an abstract set of largely arbitrary material items displayed without much sense of meaning* (Stanley, 2007: 3). This feeling is shared by Aboriginal writers who describe museums as being institutions of scientific colonialism continuing to control the representation of aboriginal arts and culture (Simpson, 2001). One of the biggest challenges we are dealing with extends beyond the material expropriation and displaying of non-western objects. As already highlighted in 1992 in *Turning the Page*, but featuring even more prominently in the standards formulated by international intergovernmental organisations (e.g. the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 2007) and international non-governmental organisations (e.g. the International Council of Museums), respecting and recognising the 'the First Voice' (Galla, 2008) should become one of the leading ethical principles guiding museum practices. As Martinez (2006) argues, the expropriation of traditional cultural properties is just one symptom of the larger illness that has plagued the United States and that was silencing and distorting the history and voice of the Native American community.

This point was also raised earlier by Salvador (1994) when she examined the issue of representation and voice in the context of the exhibition *The Art of being Kuna: Expressive Culture of the San Blas Islands, Panama*. Salvador points out that there might be a conflict of interest between those involved in the exhibition (i.e. the *Kuna* people) and those in control of the process (i.e. the museum professionals such as the curators). While the *Kuna's* main concern about the exhibition was

... to provide a better understanding of their society and their accomplishment and, in part, to make cultural arguments as part of the rationale for the maintenance of their integrity, to support their rights, and to protect their autonomy. (Salvador, 1994: 50)

For the staff of the museum, on the other hand, the goals were in part

... to explore the ways in which Kuna men and women express themselves through verbal and visual arts, and to foster an understanding of how the Kuna evaluate and critique the aesthetic value of their art, thereby challenging notions of the universality of western aesthetic principles. (Salvador, 1994: 50)

As we agree with Salvador, no matter how good the intention to include indigenous peoples in the curatorial practices may be, the fact that indigenous peoples might have a (political) perspective about the exhibition that differs from the ideological foundation of the museum enterprise, is, indeed, a challenge that must not be overlooked in the discussion of the inclusive museum. This relates to, arguably, one of the most important challenges relating to the concept of an indigenous museum, viz. how to present the past and present without creating an essentialised 'other'.³

As Stanley (2007) summarises, the modernising agenda of the museum continues to be heavily embedded in the belief that traditional cultural beliefs, practices and material manifestations must be saved. In other words, exhibitions focusing on indigenous peoples fail to show them as dynamic, living cultures (Simpson, 2001). This raises the issue that museums recreate the past (Sepúlveda dos Santos, 2003) while indigenous peoples' interests can be best described *in terms of contemporaneity* (Stanley, 2007: 7). Indigenous peoples' interest in museums can best be understood in terms of using their (historical) collections and institutions to address contemporary issues. Or, indeed, as Sepúlveda dos Santos argues, in order for museums to be true places of memory it is important that the museum makes the link between the past and contemporary issues, or uses its objects in such a way that those objects emphasise the *persistence of lived experiences transmitted through generations* (2003: 29).

A good example of this practice is the work of the Hopi-Tewa artist, Dan Namingha. He is a painter and sculptor with a strong modern vision and turns originality into a re-visioning of tradition. Martínez (2006) compares Namingha's artistic work to the philosophy of the Maori intellectual, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who argues that projects relating to indigenous peoples can only be projects wherein the people and their culture can represent themselves. For Namingha, this approach translates into works of art that are characterised by a

blend of ancient Hopi symbols and contemporary Western visual styling (Martínez, 2006). A similar approach is also followed by some San artists. For example, Coex'ae Qgam depicts in *Guitars and Shapes* items that derive from the 'modern' world. Other artists not only engage with modern objects in their paintings, they flirt with postmodern aspects such as juxtaposing or conflating old motifs with new ones. Another contemporary San artist, Xg'oa Mangana depicts in his painting the traditional spirit, //Gauwa, who points to watches and pants with his eyes resembling the details of the watches' dials. One of Xg'oa Mangana's favourite pictures is his self-portrait wherein he has painted himself as a blend of modernism and traditionalism representing both a farm worker – with the boots, socks and t-shirt – and a trance dancer – by standing in the posture of trance: erect with an intent gaze and entoptics (geometric designs) whirling about his head (Guenther, 2006). Ames (1994) argues that these *voices from the margin* must be understood in the context of a post-colonial morality, critical of mainstream Eurocentric narratives. If museums want to be more inclusive and live up to the expectation that they will facilitate dialogue, they will have to create a space for non-essentialised indigenous voices (Ames, 1994).

So while museums are increasingly becoming aware that they must facilitate social change, and often have achieved this through collaborative exhibitions built by indigenous peoples and museum practitioners working together, as Krmpotich and Anderson (2005) make us aware, this process also calls for a wider engagement in the context of the indigenous rights movement as epitomised in the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. In other words, while western museums must be applauded for having moved away from a colonial museology to a cooperative and collaborative one (Kreps, 2006) supported, shaped and expressed through many published codes of ethics (for an overview see Besterman, 2006) that place the social purpose of museums at the centre of their mission, (Western) museology, nevertheless, is often still a practice that is focused on organising and reconfiguring objects so that they fit a Western construct of culture, history, art and heritage (Kreps, 2006). So while we must praise the fact that indigenous peoples' rights to control, manage and interpret their cultural heritage are increasingly being recognised in current museological practice, from a critical and discursive point of view,

questions must still be raised as to how far this engagement sits comfortably with the demands of indigenous peoples for the right of self-determination. In other words, questions must be raised as to what extent these new collaborative museum practices are framed according to dominant western narratives or to the cultural praxes of indigenous peoples.

Objects and dialogues

In our exploratory enquiry about new museum practices, our attention was drawn to a recent debate about ownership and personhood within the context of museology (Busse, 2008; Baker, 2008; Herle, 2008; Bell, 2008; Geismar, 2008). Busse (2008), in particular, makes the point that in order to reformulate curatorial practices it is important to redefine the concept and meaning of objects. While the above authors do not question the importance of objects, they all argue that the real importance does not lie in the objects themselves but in the way they embody the physical manifestation of social relationships. The whole idea that objects matter because they have agency and efficacy and as such become a kind of person, draws upon recent anthropological theorising by Gell (1998) and Strathern (1999). Furthermore, we have not only been inspired by Gell's and Strathern's approach that suggests that objects are 'social persons', we have also been influenced by Appadurai's (1986) and Kopytoff's (1986) defining of objects as 'biographical agents', valued because of the associations they have acquired throughout time.

Focusing on the social network that surrounds a particular object becomes particularly important within the context of returning cultural objects to their original source communities (Kelly and Gordon, 2002). Using the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* of 1990 (NAGPRA) as an illustration, we argue that the whole debate about returning indigenous peoples' cultural objects to their original source is an apt example of how museum practices are still embedded in a dominant western discourse that emphasises the historical, or mummified, aspects of the tangible and intangible culture of indigenous peoples. NAGPRA is promoting an image of *native Americans as mere passive recipients of their cultural identity, beholden to their ancestors and the museum community for the re-creation of their cultures* (Harding, 2005: 137) when it defines cultural patrimony as objects having ongoing

historical, traditional or cultural importance, central to the Native American group or culture itself. According to Harding (2005) NAGPRA's dominating narrative focuses on the loss, alienation and cultural genocide of the objects as long as these are not returned to their originators.

The recovery or the return of the objects to their 'original' culture has been applauded as one of the most liberating and emancipatory events in recent years for indigenous peoples, particularly in the context of the protection of indigenous peoples' rights of cultural ownership. However, as we have argued elsewhere (Pilcher and Vermeylen, 2008), the process of recovery means more than just smothering the object in the past and authenticity; recovery can only happen when heritage or tradition is connected to the experience of everyday life as discovered through the voices of indigenous peoples themselves.

At this point we find it particularly useful to engage with art works that not only question, but also contribute to a better understanding of curating ethnographic objects. This approach chimes with the concept of 'figurative repatriation' as introduced by Kramer (2004). According to Kramer, 'artist warriors' can forcibly recover the meaning of indigenous objects on display in western cultural settings without having to rely on a western tainted discourse of moral or legal ownership.

The exhibition *Pasifika Styles* (2006), curated at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, is a good example of this concept. *Pasifika Styles* was an initiative of the museum curator, Amiria Salmond, in collaboration with the guest curator, Rosanna Raymond, a Samoan New Zealander who is an influential figure in Maori/Polynesian fashion, performance and installation art. Herle (2008) applauds the exhibition for its relational form of curatorship which provided the facility for indigenous peoples to reconnect to their ancestral treasures. In our opinion, this exhibition must specifically be praised for creating a platform – mostly through installation art projects – that emphasised the dynamic relationship between the past and the present. For example, Maori artist Lisa Reihana, tried with her installation *he tautoko*⁴ to provoke a process of critical engagement of the viewers with the museum's collection by encouraging people to think for themselves about the possible meanings created by the new positioning of the museum's collection. She comments:

It's interesting territory for an artist to work in a museum; they have collections – rich and loaded material. It's not the blank canvas that a gallery usually presents...We call treasured artefacts 'ta'onga'. Pasifika Styles allows me the opportunity to show people these aren't just objects, they embody life blood of our living culture. (Pasifika Styles label text, quoted in Herle, 2008: 164-165).

While the exhibition offers the opportunity for artists to reconnect with their ancestral treasures and acts as a platform for a contemporary political debate about the colonial history as embodied in the museum's collection, Herle (2008) points out that the exhibition also provides the means to air frustrations and raise questions about the museum's practices of collecting, classifying and containing objects⁵. Besides installations that incorporate historic pieces from the museum, the exhibition also includes installations which are strictly contemporary such as *Tales of the Maori Border* by the artists Natalie Robertson and Hemi Macgregor.

What these artworks have in common is that they are making a statement about who is in control. As Kramer (2004) points out, contemporary native artists are using their art to make claims about self-determination, but this requires an engagement with non-native people. In order to make successful claims of self-identity, control and self-determination rights, indigenous peoples' messages and indeed, voices, need to be *heard, seen and witnessed by non-native people* (Kramer, 2004: 164). Maybe more than any other form of repatriation, figurative repatriation requires dialogue and narratives. In the next part of this paper we will explore to what extent an online museum could progressively facilitate the process of providing dialogue and voice. As Solanilla (2008) argues, 'cybermuseumology' may further transform the museum landscape and provide an opportunity to challenge some of the problems identified above (e.g. essentialising practices):

The communication and interaction possibilities offered by the Web to layer information and to allow exploration of multiple meanings are only starting to be exploited. In this context, cybermuseumology is known as a practice that is knowledge-driven rather than object-driven, and its main goal is to disseminate knowledge using the interaction possibilities of 'Information Communication

Technologies.' (Langlais, 2005: 73-74)

One promising development which merits further exploration is the idea of transforming the exhibiting of ethnographic objects accompanied by texts and graphics into an act of 'cyber' discourse that allows indigenous peoples to involve us in their own history through their own voices and gestures. This is particularly the case since indigenous peoples are using new technologies, such as the internet, as a new medium through which they can reclaim their histories, land rights, knowledge and cultural heritage (Zimmerman et al., 2000). As such, new technology has played a significant role in the contestation and formation of the current identity of indigenous peoples by creating new social and political spaces through visual and narrative cultural praxis (Ginsburg, 2000; 2006; Hopkins, 2006; Deger, 2006).

To summarise the above, we argue that indigenous peoples' relationships with objects are ultimately social ones, and therefore within the practice of museology the attention should shift from a focus on the objects to a focus on the changing social relationship they represent. This shift in thinking is to a certain extent embedded in the 2003 *Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Kreps, 2005). However, museums are still facing the practical challenges of how to move from being object centred institutions to being 'spaces' that, first and foremost, create platforms for dialogues between indigenous peoples and their audiences, dialogues (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Kurin, 2004; Galla, 2008) that allow an exploration of alternative museological practices as set out by indigenous peoples themselves within the spirit of their quest for greater rights of self-determination. It is in this context that we explore the value of an online museum as an agent of dialogue and collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

Online museums

In 1997 Walsh addressed the question of how a museum's presence on the web might mitigate the effect of what he described as the 'unassailable voice' of the museum (Walsh, 1997: 77). We suggest that in the context of an indigenous online museum there needs to be an acknowledgement of the nature of its structure when responding to how it might recognise indigenous voices. Our argument in this respect begins by

recognising that online museums may take various forms. It is possible to find everything from what has been described as 'brochure-ware' sites, through to virtual tours that take place in a three dimensional replica of a physical gallery space and exhibitions which exist only online (Dietz, 1998: 3-10). However, we suggest that one can engage with this multiplicity through Manovich's argument that a new media project, such as an online museum, may be understood as consisting of a database and an interface to that database. It is through an interface that the contents of the underlying database are structured into a narrative (Manovich, 2003). Manovich suggests that database and narrative are 'natural enemies' (Manovich, 2003). As he explains where

... the database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events)... (Manovich, 2003: 225).

However, as Christiane Paul observes, Manovich's account does not mean that a site cannot be understood in terms of both database and narrative (Paul, 2007). The visitor to an online museum may be understood to be *traversing a database, following links between its records as established by the database's creator* (Manovich, 2003: 227). Approached in terms of Manovich's argument, an online museum may be thought of as positioned somewhere on a spectrum. At one extreme, the website is experienced as collection of discrete items of information.⁶ These discrete items might be digitised representations of physical objects, video clips or sound recordings. At the other end of the range, the online museum is experienced as a narrative.

The implications of understanding online museums in these terms are suggested by Manovich's observation that with the database where

... traditional cultures provided people with well defined narratives (myths, religion) and little 'stand alone' information, today we have too much information and too few narratives that tie it all together. (Manovich, 2003: 217)⁷.

It seems to us important to acknowledge that, while the creation of a database of material accessible online may work to weaken the institutional narratives within which

collections have traditionally been situated, at the same time it may also encourage the perception of digitised holdings as isolated objects (McTavish, 2006). In other words, there may be a risk that any sense of the indigenous narratives that order culture, which may have been conveyed by the unassailable voice of the museum, will in turn also be lost. Understood in these terms, online museums may result in access to information about an indigenous culture but not an understanding of its knowledge. While material authored by museums may tend to bring with it an institutional perspective, on the other hand the use of databases that simply provide information without providing adequate context for the relevant material may result in a *homogeneity that is difficult to penetrate* by viewers (Trant, 2006: 2). Viewers presented only with information may be unable to discern its significance, or important distinctions that are there to be drawn between what may appear to be similar materials. Such issues may arise as concerns irrespective of whether what is presented takes the form of a digitised representation of an object or an oral history. While there will always be some sort of order to a traverse of a museum's collection, this may not be one with any coherent basis (Weinbren, 2007).

While information communication technologies do potentially provide opportunities in the conservation and dissemination of the 'life stories' which give an account of an indigenous culture as it is experienced (Solanilla, 2008: 105), we argue that in order for that to happen in the context of an online museum there needs to be collaboration in respect of not only the content, but also of the interface provided for viewers to engage with that content. Solanilla acknowledges the view held by some writers, including Langlais, that the inclusion of indigenous heritage in an online museum may become subject to ideological manipulation (Solanilla, 2008). This does not lead Langlais to dismiss cybermuseumology altogether, but rather to argue that it is important for curators to understand that cybermuseumology loses the essential interpersonal element that needs to be present if intangible heritage is understood as *the process of making sense that is generally transmitted orally and through face-to-face experience* (Langlais, 2005: 78). In this respect, cybermuseumology does not enable a reality to be reproduced but instead results in the construction of a valuable, but completely new, experience of cultural knowledge (Langlais, 2005). Langlais understands the technology employed in cybermuseumology as providing the

means by which construction of meaning may, at least to some extent, be dispersed away from institutional centres of control, such as museums. Interactivity, along with communication, is identified by Langlais as one of the new possibilities open to museums for the transfer of knowledge.

We would agree that interactivity gives museum visitors the opportunity to *create more 'freely' his or her representation of knowledge and heritage* (Langlais, 2005: 76). However, although the interactivity made possible by information communication technologies is much vaunted as a means to undercut the univocal museum, it is our argument that it may actually be counter productive in bringing indigenous voices into online museums. There has been much discussion in the context of online museums of the use of social tagging and 'folksonomy' (Solanilla, 2008; Trant, 2006). In these processes, keywords (called 'tags') are supplied and shared by visitors as a means of accessing museum content. These tags in turn give rise to a classification system (a 'folksonomy'). Trant observes that tagging partly appeals to museums because it may be understood as a means by which the viewer engages both with the museum and with the works in it (Trant, 2006). Yet at the same time she points out, in the context of discussing the process in an art museum, because tagging is initiated by visitors, and enables them to give significance to works, it poses an important challenge to the museum (Trant, 2006). In general terms then, tagging and 'folksonomy' are concrete realisations of interactivity which provide innovative ways of engaging with the issue of classifying the contents of museums. Such interactivity may effectively be employed to permit the retrieval of material by those who approach it from, and within, very different contexts (Solanilla, 2008). However, we caution that in the context of an online museum of an indigenous culture it seems to us that ordering museum content by means of undifferentiated interactivity by all visitors may detract from an indigenous community's involvement in the communication of its knowledge. The result may be an understanding of individual objects or stories structured according to viewers' terms of reference and isolated from indigenous narrative context. A possible corrective to this issue would be to limit the use of tagging and 'folksonomy' to those within an indigenous community.

The implications of the form of interactivity enabled by online museums, and the impact that may have on

viewers' understanding of indigenous communities, may be investigated further by examining how they relate to the other possibility of information communication technologies identified by Langlais: communication. If interactivity should concern itself simply with encouraging communication (Goldblum *et al.*, 2007) then this is compatible with Langlais' conception of interactivity. However, if communication is to be understood more specifically as that which is concerned with keeping heritage alive (Langlais, 2005: 77), then it seems to us that in the context of an indigenous online museum it may not be appropriate to structure access to it through visitors' understanding of information about that culture. We will try and outline our concerns in this regard by referring to three interesting examples of projects that illustrate how individual items may be experienced differently by users because of the narrative structure of the interface to the website (Goldblum *et al.*, 2007).

Two of the projects were created under the auspices of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (*Life After the Holocaust and Ripples of Genocide: Journey Through Eastern Congo*). A further project, developed without being aligned with a museum or cultural institution, documented the legacy of the graduating class of Benjamin Franklin High School in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina (Goldblum *et al.*, 2007). All three projects provide access to information expressed through multimedia content that includes, amongst other things, audio, photographic and video material.

Goldblum *et al.* (2007) describe how, in *Life After the Holocaust*, the review of the individual audio files recording stories of survivors of the Holocaust revealed that the stories shared many common themes. These themes were used as the structure for the story told by the project overall. The themes employed were 'Arriving in New York'; 'Starting Over'; 'Living with the Past'; 'Telling their Children' and 'Faith, Guilt and Responsibility' (Goldblum *et al.*, 2007). In this work it seems to us, visitor access and interaction with the content reflects, and is essentially determined by, the survivors' accounts. In *Ripples of Genocide: Journey Through Eastern Congo*, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum decided to create a website about the journey of the actress and UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, Angelina Jolie, to Eastern Congo where she met refugees from the Rwandan genocide. In this project the 'story-telling device' that is used to link the individual items of

information is the travel journal. It might be suggested that structuring the interface to that site by means of a travel journal format imposes a Western, post-colonial meaning on the genocide in Rwanda. We consider that there is an argument for saying that, despite undoubted successes in other respects, this online site is inconsistent with trying to reposition indigenous peoples as authors and experts of their cultures (Krpmotich and Anderson, 2005).

However, acknowledging of the significance of both the content and interface of online museums, such sites do have the potential to provide an exemplary opportunity for First People to *assert their active and continued presence in the contemporary world* by means of collaboration with museums (Krpmotich and Anderson, 2005: 377). Indeed, it is our argument that collaborative online museums may be particularly effective at fulfilling a social role that extends beyond weakening the unassailable voice of the museum. Krmpotich and Anderson have observed that

... if recognised by museum-goers, collaboration within the museum can act as a metaphor for self-representation and self-determination in social, political, and economic spheres. (Krpmotich and Anderson, 2005: 378)

The website of the South African National Gallery, under the umbrella of Iziko Museums of Cape Town, is part of the Gallery's role as a *hub of cultural activity, and a central place for gathering together South Africa's diverse heritage* (Iziko website). However, it could move beyond being part of an expression about South Africa to being a particularly effective opportunity for the expression of that nation and its peoples. We suggest that online museums bring not only the possibility of undermining the ahistorical and unassailable voice to be found in a range of cultural expressions, but also a particularly effective chance to make explicit an engagement with it by indigenous voice(s).

In this regard we are indebted to Leuthold's argument concerning the *new genre of indigenous documentary* (Leuthold, 2001: 63). He has suggested

[We] can understand indigenous media from a rhetorical framework in a broad sense of the term: as forms of communication intended to move the viewer to identification and, ultimately, agreement

with the author or speaker. (Leuthold, 2001: 56)

He describes how in such work

... native film- and video makers have sought to control the representation of their own communities rather than depend upon progressive non-natives to give them voice; through film and video, natives themselves are no longer voiceless. (Leuthold, 2001: 59)

In doing so, indigenous communities fundamentally change the way in which they present to other people: *[the] right to represent oneself redefines the victim as a proactive political participant; now members of a community can best define and choose their own course of action* (Leuthold, 2001: 63). As Leuthold points out, the significance of such a process is that *[in] this sense, we can view the act of documenting rhetorically, as well as the subject matter of the documentaries themselves* (Leuthold, 2001: 63). We argue that indigenous online museums may be approached in similar terms: they may be understood as sites which provide effective platforms for challenging dominant, historically objective, cultural representations of indigenous culture. In this way, visitors may be understood to be invited to perceive indigenous peoples as politically active with the authority to represent themselves.

The significance of the sort of collaboration to which we wish to draw attention may be exemplified by a comparison of the Blackfoot Gallery's *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life* discussed by Krmpotich and Anderson (2005) with the artwork/exhibition, *Miscast* (1996), by Skotnes.⁸ *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life* is described as *one of the first permanent galleries in Canada to be built using a fully collaborative approach* (Krpmotich and Anderson, 2005: 379). Skotnes's work is an interesting challenge to the unassailable museological voice that was not collaborative. Included in this work was the display of thirteen casts of headless body parts of *San* people. Two factors motivated Skotnes to curate the exhibition. One was to contrast two different forms of visual representations of the *San* already to be found in the museum (i.e. the archive and the diorama). The second factor was to show what Skotnes calls the 'storeroom'. At the time that Skotnes was putting the exhibition together, there were hardly any exhibitions of the *San*'s art and ways of life. This was to the great surprise of Skotnes,

who discovered that storerooms of museums, galleries, universities, libraries and state archives were literally crammed with material about the *San*.

Although *Miscast* cannot be understood as a collaborative exhibition, we found it particularly interesting because Skotnes tried to challenge the ahistoricity of the museum-authored diorama. To Skotnes, the use of the casts of body parts represented the practice of beautifying and romanticising the image of the *San* while not noticing their suffering. According to Skotnes, judging from the visitor comments, the artwork provoked precisely an awareness of these sorts of emotions. She quotes a visitor as thanking her for:

... the opportunity to confront our image/conceptions of a people who rarely have a chance to represent themselves to a Western view. It challenges our knowledge – and the way that knowledge has been acquired about African peoples. (quoted in Skotnes, 2002: 268)

This quote embodies what we envisage as possible in online museums, to the extent that at least in part, it becomes what Bal has called a *meta-exhibition* – or an exhibition exploring the nature of exhibiting (Bal: 2007: 72). In this way, we argue that representations of indigenous peoples could generate a reflexive response by viewers in which there is interactivity between the author and the audience that enables an appreciation of the practices employed in its production, irrespective of whether that is an exhibition, or a work such as a film. We suggest that, in the event this is authored solely by indigenous peoples, or done collaboratively, this process may also be understood as a rhetorical assertion of self-determination. As one of the team from the indigenous community involved with the Gallery commented *an exhibition 'totally designed by the Blackfoot people' is substantially different than having 'someone with a camera, asking questions, observing'* (Krpmotich and Anderson, 2005: 392).

The reason that we consider online museums to be potentially effective sites in this respect may be illustrated by using as examples the sort of engagement an online museum could make possible with pre-existing film material that reflects colonial perceptions of indigenous peoples. One such example might be the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980).⁹ In employing film to exemplify the possibilities of an online museum as a

platform for indigenous peoples to experiment in exposing the meta-narrative(s) in the process of film making, we were inspired by Basu's (2008) work on reframing ethnographic film. He praises Sidén's video art installation, *Warte Mal!*¹⁰ (1999), for its innovative way of using ethnographic film material to provoke certain feelings of involvement by those who engage with the installation. Basu (2008) mentions, in particular, two aspects as being provocative. First, the installation was set up in such a way as to evoke feelings of partial experience. Second, the installation also stimulated visitors to reflect upon their own roles vis-à-vis the people they watched on the images. Basu argues that precisely because of these two techniques, the visitors became aware of the plurality of alternative readings/navigations that they might have made (2008: 105).

The online museum offers a number of possibilities for revealing ways in which films may represent a dominant ideological voice. Digital technologies provide the opportunity to challenge what was, in the past, a fixed narrative pathway constructed for viewers through a film. As Weinbren (2007) has observed: *contemporary entertainment films are designed to appear seamless – as if the final film is a natural object, containing all that is necessary for it and nothing else* (Weinbren, 2007: 69). In fact, a film is generally constructed by gathering together a *database of audiovisual elements* and then constructing one story out of the gathered material (Weinbren, 2007: 69). This process may be employed to assert dominant political interests regarding indigenous cultures. Online museums could provide a means to expose such processes, which are normally obscured. New media art provides specific examples of the ways in which the digitisation of film provides opportunities to expose the narratives by which such political messages are carried, and so help to reveal positions that might otherwise remain unclear. An online museum could employ a database to enable an indigenous community to rearrange films to reveal underlying cultural positions (Paul, 2007). As Christiane Paul has described, it is possible to dissect films to place the narrative that was originally at the forefront of the work into the background (Paul, 2007: 101). The example of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy's project *How I learned* (2002) clarifies how this might be achieved. The work restructures a television series, *Kung Fu*, by employing categories such as 'how I learned about blocking punches,' 'how I learned about

exploiting workers,' or 'how I learned to love the land' (Paul, 2007: 103), to reveal in greater clarity than otherwise might be possible the cultural stereotypes used in the visual narratives of the programme (Paul, 2007).

However, the possibility of a collaborative online museum revealing such narratives rhetorically, depends not only on this process being understood to reflect the voice(s) of indigenous peoples but, importantly, that this is also understood by visitors to be the case. Otherwise it is difficult to see how it would be understood to be an invitation to identify, and agree with, the indigenous community's perspectives about the way in which they have been depicted. In this regard, we consider online museums also offer an effective means of communication. An approach such as the one exemplified in *How I learned* might be combined with other techniques such as those Paul identifies in the work of George Legrady. She describes how Legrady's works engages with the archive and database as sites that record culture (Paul, 2007). In particular, the work *Slippery Traces* involved viewers navigating through over two hundred and forty postcards. Although this paper is not the place for us to discuss individual works in detail, it is worthwhile mentioning Paul's description of the way in which viewers of the work were invited to

...first choose one of three quotes appearing on the screen, each of which embodies a different perspective – anthropological, colonialist, or media theory – and thus provides an interpretive angle for the experience of the projects. (Paul, 2007: 104-5)

In the same way, visitors to an online museum could be provided with a choice of possible voices by which its collection might be experienced. These could include, for example, not only a choice between a colonial understanding and the viewpoint of just one indigenous community, but also, conceivably, the perspectives of a number of indigenous peoples. It seems to us that this suggests a range of possible interfaces with material contained in an online museum that could be used to encourage visitors to reflect on the implications of what, and how, representations of an indigenous community had been constructed, including that of the museum site itself.

Conclusion

From their inception in the 19th century, museums have been more than just places that store, preserve, classify and protect objects; museums have contributed to processes of social change, but have also manipulated an image of history. For a very long time, museums have dismembered and classified the past in such a way that they have turned history into a fetish embellished in a cult of authenticity. Under pressure from indigenous rights movements, museums are now seeking reconciliation with indigenous peoples through facilitating collaborative projects and setting up networks of dialogue, supported and encouraged by appropriate codes of ethics and local, national and international protocols. While we encourage people to celebrate the concept of an inclusive museum that works together with indigenous peoples in the recovery of objects and their meanings, we also caution that the rhetoric of collaboration is still framed in a western discourse that focuses primarily on the objectification – i.e. 'essentialising' – of tradition and heritage.

We have argued that focusing more on the social networks that surround a particular object opens up new avenues of enquiry as to how, and to what extent, museums can become more inclusive vis-à-vis indigenous peoples. This approach means moving beyond the current discourse that approaches the history of the (ethnographic) museum and its objects from only one dominant perspective. By tracing an object and its history through its lifecycle, new metaphors can be discovered, ones that show that indigenous peoples have not always been victims. Maybe more importantly, it also allows us to show a more complex narrative of the history of indigenous peoples; it gives new meaning to the principle of the right to self-determination within the context of museology. Instead of recognising indigenous peoples as mere custodians of their objects, the museum we envisage is a museum that allows indigenous peoples to define the parameters through which we explore both their tangible and intangible heritage.

We think that an online museum in particular, might be able to facilitate this transition. Instead of approaching history and culture from a one-sided perspective, we argue that an online museum shows promise in its potential to foster meta-narratives that can expose conflicts, contradictions and ambiguities, but above all acknowledges multiple shifting identities. In this sense, we see the online museum as a space where indigenous

cultures can collide and display their heterogeneity, where they can network and where they can hybridise. As part of their struggle to gain the right to self-determination, indigenous peoples want to draw attention to the constructed and plural nature of histories. In this sense, the online, indigenous museum becomes a museum that explores the nature of exhibiting and museum practices, drawing attention to the unintentional meanings, omissions and contradictions present in any display of heritage. In order for museums to become inclusive and indeed post-colonial, they must first and foremost create a platform that allows indigenous peoples to expose the anachronistic constructions of objectification and history making; we can envisage that the online museum might be able to host such a platform through a network of multiple narratives as defined by indigenous peoples themselves.

(The title of this paper has been inspired a quote from the artist Rosanne Raymond about museum artefacts: *if you let the objects dance they will* [quoted in Bell, 2008: 135])



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NOTES

1. The *San* are former hunter gatherers and the oldest surviving inhabitants of Southern Africa. The arrival of pastoralists and agriculturalists of the Bantu-language group (in the last 2,500-500 years) and white settlers (in the last 300 years) has resulted in the assimilation, subordination, or even persecution, of the *San* peoples. About 100,000 *San* survive today in the Kalahari basin, but while their physical survival may no longer be at risk, their cultural survival is highly precarious. While local and regional variation exists, the vast majority of the *San* have lost their land rights and with that, the opportunity and skills to hunt and gather food. They are almost invariably poor by local standards, and few can survive on subsistence farming as this requires access to land, a suitable soil and climate and some capital in the form of livestock or fences to protect their crops. Many depend for their livelihoods on seasonal farm work (often paid in kind) and the collection of bush food. In countries like Namibia and Botswana food aid from the government is important. Seen as an archetypical hunting and gathering society, the *San* are subject to numerous ethnographic studies, documentaries, films, postcards, etc. (Suzman, 2001).
2. We became aware of these projects from Sharon Daniel's work *The Database: an Aesthetics of Dignity*.
3. For example, *Hidden Peoples of the Amazon*, an exhibition presented in the Museum of Mankind (1985-1986) was criticised by Amazonian Indians and Survival International for portraying a romantic, exotic, and often nostalgic, image of small-scale societies which seemed to live in harmony with nature. A somewhat different example was the exhibition *Vestido Con El Sol: Traditional Textiles from Mexico – Guatemala – Panama* in the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago (1990), which displayed beautiful patterned textiles produced by indigenous peoples. However, in the accompanying catalogue, an essay by Maricela Garcia Vargas, described in detail the continuing repression and genocide of Mayan minority groups and suggested that ... *to do an exhibit on textiles and not deal with the political reality of the killing of some of the indigenous groups that produce these beautiful works of art would be irresponsible on the museum's part*. (Vargas, 1990: 6 in Simpson, 2001: 37)
4. *He tautoko* featured a carved wooden *tekoteko*, an ancestral figure originally attached to a house gable. The carving was collected in the 1830s near the Bay of Islands, the tribal homeland of the artist's father. The region is known for being the first centre of colonial government and as such was also the location from where some of the first Maori objects left Aotearoa. The *tekoteko* is positioned in the top half of the case so that its iridescent shell eyes look down on the visitor. The figure is wearing white headphones, connected to a visitor's listening post, and placed with its back to a video screen showing digitally manipulated images from 19th century Maori collections in the museum and of the artist's journey between New Zealand and Cambridge. The movement on the screen, the stories and the songs animate the figure, highlighting its continued ancestral presence and ongoing connection to the past and contemporary events.
5. For example, Wayne Youle's installation *hahea* (2006) and Jason Hall's *The do-it-yourself repatriation kit* (2006). For more details of these installations, see Herle (2008: 169-171).
6. As Manovich acknowledges in the context of the world of new media, the word 'narrative' tends to be used *as an all inclusive term, to cover up the fact that we have not yet developed a language to describe these new strange objects* (Manovich, 2001: 228). See also Dietz, 1999.
7. In the context of theorising database practice in new media art, it has been observed that the terms 'data' and 'information' are often erroneously conflated (Stalbaum, 2004). While we acknowledge this in the present context, we use the terms 'information' and 'knowledge' in the sense employed by Langlois, who observed that information can be compared to raw data, whereas knowledge, according to Foray (*Ecritures dans les cinemas d'Afrique noire*) is a cognitive capacity to learn, *which enables us to extrapolate and learn new knowledge* (Langlois, 2005: 74).
8. *Miscast* was exhibited in 1996 at the South African National Gallery. With *Miscast*, the artist, Skotnes, wanted to contrast her installation with two other visual representations of the *San*. The first is the creation of an archive of the */Xam* (a sub group of the *San*) in the 1870s and 1880s. The archive was a collaborative project which gave the */Xam* the opportunity to express themselves. The second is the making of a diorama at the South African Museum in Cape Town

using casts made in the 1910s. The diorama was mainly a European construction of primitive hunter gatherers. Skotnes' *Miscast* was a response to the other visual representations, interpreting the varied processes that created them (Skotnes, 2002).

9. *The Gods Must be Crazy* was followed by a sequel *The Gods Must be Crazy II* (1989). In *Rereading the Gods Must be Crazy Films* Keyan Tomaselli provides, amongst other things, a background to the commodification of the *San* and the films of Jamie Uys, who directed and produced *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, and also a discussion of various narrative themes. Tomaselli comments that although the narrative techniques employed in the films became more sophisticated over time, despite claims to being apolitical, Uys's position matched that of the *dominant political interests* (Tomaselli, 2006: 194).
10. In 1999 the artist, Sidén, spent time investigating prostitution in Eastern Europe. She recorded a series of video interviews whilst staying for long periods in a motel in Dubi where rooms are rented to prostitutes by the hour. She documented her stay with videos, photographs, and a written diary. Using this material, Sidén has created an artwork, *Warte Mal!* which exposes the power relationships within the sex industry (Carolyn and Haynes, 2007).