
Museums as Contact Zones

In early 1989 I found myself sitting around a table in the basement of the Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Oregon. About twenty people had gathered to discuss the museum's Northwest Coast Indian collection. The group included museum staff, several well-known anthropologists and experts on Northwest Coast art, and a group of Tlingit elders, accompanied by a couple of younger Tlingit translators. I was present as a "consultant," part of a grant supporting the proceedings.

The museum's Rasmussen Collection was amassed in the 1920s in southern Alaska and along the coast of Canada. Long displayed in a drab, somewhat "ethnographic" manner, it was overdue for reinstallation. The director of the Portland Art Institute, Dan Monroe, who had worked with native tribes in Alaska, took the unusual step of inviting a representative group of Tlingit authorities, prominent elders from important clans, to participate in planning discussions.

In the museum basement, objects from the collection were brought out, one by one, and presented to the elders for comment: a raven mask, an abalone-inlaid headdress, a carved rattle . . . What transpired was a series of complicated, moving performances, by turns serious and lighthearted.

The curatorial staff seems to have expected the discussions to focus on the objects of the collection. I, at any rate, anticipated that the elders would comment on them in a detailed way, telling us, for example: this is how the mask was used; it was made by so-and-so; this is its power in

terms of the clan, our traditions, and so forth. In fact, the objects were not the subject of much direct commentary by the elders, who had their own agenda for the meeting. They referred to the regalia with appreciation and respect, but they seemed only to use them as *aides-mémoires*, occasions for the telling of stories and the singing of songs.

The songs were sung and stories told in accordance with clear protocols governing the authority of particular individuals and clans, rules establishing performance rights. An elder representing one clan would perform his or her songs and stories; then an elder from another clan would offer thanks and reciprocate. The whole event had a ceremonial dimension, punctuated by intense emotion, silences, and laughter. The objects in the Rasmussen Collection, focus for the consultation, were left—or so it seemed to me—at the margin. For long periods no one paid any attention to them. Stories and songs took center stage.

Amy Marvin says of the prayers she sings that they "balance" her, "as in a boat," so that she can tell stories. She begins haltingly, seeming to search for points in a familiar landscape, places "over there . . ." She tells the "Glacier Bay story" about a village covered with ice: a sense of great loss. She sings a memorial song. "Where is my land?" "I'm not going to see my village again . . ." She refers to the previous day, when a killer-whale drum was brought out—a drum the clan did not know had been preserved. A very heavy moment, she says. Jimmy George, an elder nearly ninety years old, had offered the killer-whale story, which belongs to his clan . . . a story he once told at San Diego Sea World. She thanks him.

The Glacier Bay recitation concerns her present homeland around Hoonah, Alaska. This becomes explicit when Amy Marvin connects the loss of tribal lands in the story with current Forest Service policies regulating their use.

A headdress representing an octopus is brought out. So she tells an octopus story about an enormous monster that blocks the whole bay with its tentacles and keeps the salmon from coming in. (All the stories are told in Tlingit with translation and explanation by the younger participants—elaborate performances, sometimes interrupted by dialogue.) The Tlingit hero has to fight and kill the octopus to let the salmon come into the bay, salmon which are the livelihood of the group. The hero opens the bay so the group can live. And by the end of the story the octopus has metamorphosed into state and federal agencies currently restricting the rights of Tlingit to take salmon according to tradition.

As performed in the museum basement, “traditional” stories and myths suggested by the old clan objects end up as specific histories with pointed meanings in current political struggles.

One of the younger Tlingit says: There will be a day when we’re back fishing there. And an older man, Austin Hammond, speaking for the Raven House in Haines, Alaska, supports Amy Marvin, saying he could feel her emotions as she spoke. He is weeping. The Glacier Bay story reminds him, he says, of how he used to fish and trap there. Now the same monster is coming underneath our canoe again. The land’s being taken from us, and that’s why I’m telling this. We’re sharpening our knives, so to speak. Words are that strong, he says.

She thanks him for his words: words need to be caught, she says. Then Austin Hammond tells about the octopus blanket made for his father (not in the museum collection), about its power. We’re telling you these things, he says to the white people assembled. We hope you’ll back us up.

Lydia George, a city councilwoman, fills in details about current land claims. She stresses that different clans and places come together in these struggles. She avoids generalizations about the “Tlingit.”

Austin Hammond tells a long Raven story, his father’s blanket spread in front of him. He goes into great detail about different kinds of fish, the specific times of their entry into the bay and rivers. He tells how the Raven determined these things—all the species of salmon, the rules of their behavior, and of our fishing. Why am I telling this? he asks. Four people from Washington, D.C. came to our convention. They told us we were taking up all our salmon. I told them the story—how the Raven worked on the salmon for everyone here on our land.

A beaded jacket is laid on the table. Austin Hammond tells a “Bible story”—a Raven tale reminiscent of Jonah and the Whale. We have no writing, he says, so we make copies in our jackets, blankets. He thanks another elder for permission to tell the story. In it, the Raven flies down the whale’s blowhole, sets up a little stove, and cooks the salmon the whale swallows. But he can’t get out. The humorous tale turns tragic. To our white brothers here, Hammond says, our prayers are like the Raven’s. Who will cut open the whale, so we can come out? We’re in need of all our ancestors, our land is being taken. Our children . . . Who will look after them? Maybe you can help us, help cut open the whale. That’s how I feel.

Sadly, he tells of being alone in his clan house. He invokes his grandfathers and ancestors, then sings a song composed by his uncle, Joe

Wright, weaving a portion of it into his urgent speech. We’re losing our grounds, he says, so I hold onto this song.

More speeches, stories, and explications follow—formal responses to the speakers. After lunch, the mood is lighter: love songs are sung, spiced with off-color humor and innuendo. Anyone can sing along with these. A younger Tlingit explains that at memorials and parties there is a heavy part—dealing with loss, the ancestors, name giving—and a lighter side: humor and expressions of love for one another.

As the process continues over three days, objects from the Rasmussen Collection lie on the museum tables or in storage boxes.

Reciprocities

The experience of “consultation” left the Portland Art Museum staff with difficult dilemmas. It was clear that from the elders’ viewpoint the collected objects were not primarily “art.” They were referred to as “records,” “history,” and “law,” inseparable from myths and stories expressing ongoing moral lessons with current political force. The museum was clearly informed that the elders’ voices should be presented to the public when the objects were displayed. This demand presupposed a real degree of trust, since many of the stories and songs were proprietary. Specific permissions were needed. Indeed, a prior agreement stipulated that any information revealed at the consultation would be jointly controlled by the museum and the elders. On more than one occasion during the proceedings, the museum was directly admonished: We’re taking the risk of confiding important things to you. It’s important that these be recorded for posterity. What will you do with what we give you? We’ll be paying attention.¹

Staff at the Portland Museum were genuinely concerned that their stewardship of the Rasmussen Collection include reciprocal communication with the communities whose art, culture, and history were at stake. But could they reconcile the kinds of meanings evoked by the Tlingit elders with those imposed in the context of a museum of “art”? How much could they decenter the physical objects in favor of narrative, history, and politics? Are there strategies that can display a mask as simultaneously a formal composition, an object with specific traditional functions in clan/tribal life, and as something that evokes an ongoing history of struggle? Which meanings should be highlighted? And which community has

the power to determine what emphasis the museum will choose? Should the museum now search out individuals with clan authority connected to other tribal objects in the collection—Kwagiulth, Haida, Tsimshian? Could it establish relations of trust with all the relevant groups and individuals? To what extent was the whole process dependent on specific personal contacts? How could the relationship deal with conflicts within contemporary tribal communities? (The Tlingit elders who came to Portland did not represent all the clans connected to the objects.) How much discussion and negotiation is enough? And how many grants could a single museum expect to receive in support of such activities? I cannot go into the personal, institutional, and funding contingencies that have delayed reinstallation of the Rasmussen Collection. Suffice it to say that the choices posed by the elders remain unresolved, their gift (and challenge) unanswered.²

As the meeting progressed, the basement of the Portland Art Museum became something more than a place of consultation or research; it became a contact zone. I borrow the term from Mary Louise Pratt. In her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation* (6–7), she defines “contact zone” as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” Unlike the term “frontier,” which is “grounded within a European expansionist perspective (the frontier is a frontier only with respect to Europe),” the expression “contact zone”

is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term “contact” I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. [It stresses] copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.

When museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship—a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull. The organizing struc-

ture of the museum-as-collection functions like Pratt’s frontier. A center and a periphery are assumed: the center a point of gathering, the periphery an area of discovery. The museum, usually located in a metropolitan city is the historical destination for the cultural productions it lovingly and authoritatively salvages, cares for, and interprets.³

What transpired in the Portland Museum’s basement was not reducible to a process of *collecting* advice or information. And something in excess of consultation was going on. A message was delivered, performed, within an ongoing contact history. As evoked in the museum’s basement, Tlingit history did not primarily illuminate or contextualize the objects of the Rasmussen Collection. Rather, the objects provoked (called forth, brought to voice) ongoing stories of struggle. From the position of the collecting museum and the consulting curator, this was a disruptive history which could not be confined to providing past tribal *context* for the objects. The museum was called to a sense of its responsibility, its stewardship of the clan objects. (Repatriation was not, at this time, an explicit issue.) The museum was asked to be accountable in a way that went beyond mere preservation. It was urged to act on behalf of Tlingit communities, not simply to represent the history of tribal objects completely or accurately. A kind of reciprocity was claimed, but not a give-and-take that could lead to a final meeting of minds, a coming together that would erase the discrepancies, the ongoing power imbalances of contact relations.

Before we explore this uneven reciprocity, it is important to realize the limits of the contact perspective I am developing here. For example, some of what went on in Portland was certainly not primarily contact zone work. Some of the songs, speeches, stories, and conversations were performances among Tlingit, not directed to the museum and its cameras but interclan work—what had to be done if the objects were to be addressed at all. (This dimension was largely obscure to me in my marginal location.) Moreover, although one cannot separate a history of loss, displacement, and reconnection from the meanings these masks, drums, and garments hold for clan elders, it would be wrong to reduce the objects’ traditional meanings, the deep feelings they still evoke, to “contact” responses. If a mask recalls a grandfather or an old story, this must include feelings of loss and struggle; but it must also include access to powerful continuity and connection. To say that (given a destructive colonial experience) all indigenous memories must be affected by contact histories is not to say that such histories determine or exhaust them. The “tribal” present is a

fabric some of whose strands extend before (and after) the encounter with white societies—an encounter that may appear endless but is actually discontinuous and, in some respects, terminable.⁴ The old objects certainly invoked these other histories (memories, hopes, oral traditions, attachments to land). But in the contact zone of the Portland Museum's basement, the meanings addressed to white interlocutors were primarily relational: "This is what the objects inspire us to say in response to our shared history, the goals of ongoing responsibility and reciprocity we differently embrace."

While *reciprocity* is a crucial stake, it will not be understood in the same way by people from different cultures in asymmetrical power relationships. Reciprocity in the Tlingit's demands for help was not, as in a commercial transaction, the goal of being paid up, quit. Rather, the intent was to challenge and rework a relationship. The objects of the Rasmussen Collection, however fairly or freely bought and sold, could never be entirely possessed by the museum. They were sites of a historical negotiation, occasions for an ongoing contact.



In Chapter 6, I discussed another museum space and practice in a contact perspective. There, the Museum of Mankind in London was shown to be enmeshed in potentially complex, asymmetrical relations with groups and individuals in Highland New Guinea. The museum, though not necessarily its ethnographer/curator, Michael O'Hanlon, wanted to be quit in its obligations to the Wahgi, whose culture and history were on display in its galleries. But glimpses of the Wahgi side of the transaction, or at least the aspirations of certain individuals, suggest a more ongoing, differently politicized understanding of the relationship. "Reciprocity," a standard for fair dealings, is a translation term, whose meanings will depend on specific contact situations. Thus, the term's different contexts and meanings, the locations of power from which it is asserted, must always be kept in view. These differences of location and meaning were at issue in the Portland Museum's basement.

(In contact zones, Pratt tells us, geographically and historically separated groups establish ongoing relations. These are not relations of equality, even though processes of *mutual* exploitation and appropriation may be at work.⁵ As we have seen, fundamental assumptions about relationship itself— notions of exchange, justice, reciprocity— may be topics of struggle

and negotiation. Moreover, contact zones are constituted through reciprocal movements of people, not just of objects, messages, commodities, and money. Highland New Guinea is distant from London, yet the Wahgi who cooperated with O'Hanlon to amass a collection of "material culture" for the Museum of Mankind felt connected, indeed entitled to visit. Their expectation was that a London tour would be arranged, similar to one several years before by a group of their neighbors, a Mount Hagen dance troupe. Certain Wahgi, at least, were ready to "work" this London-Highlands contact zone for their own purposes. O'Hanlon had to explain that his mandate from the museum did not include funds for their travel. Differences of power, control, and design of budgets determined who would be the collectors and who the collected.

Stanford University in California is also far from Highland New Guinea. It has recently been the site of a rather different set of contact relations. A dozen or so sculptors from the Highlands recently traveled to Palo Alto to carve and install a sculpture garden on the university's campus. The project was organized on a shoestring by Jim Mason, a student in anthropology, with small grants and contributions. Once at Stanford, the sculptors occupied a wooded corner of the central campus and set to work. Throughout the summer of 1994 they transformed tree trunks brought from New Guinea and soft stone from Nevada into human figures entwined with animals, fantastic designs. Their workplace was open to everyone passing by, and on Friday evenings it turned into a party, with barbecues, face painting, drumming, and dancing. The New Guinea artists taught their designs to interested Palo Altoans. Growing numbers turned up every week to hang out, make art, and celebrate.

When I visited in the autumn of 1994, the artists had returned to the Highlands and the "New Guinea Sculpture Garden" consisted of several dozen carved trunks and stones scattered among the trees. The former were secured by cables (one had recently been stolen) and protected from the rain by sheets of transparent plastic. People wandered in and pulled back the plastic shrouding crocodiles and long-beaked birds. A leaflet informed visitors that the project still needed to raise \$40,000 for site installation and landscaping. Suggested contributions ranged from \$10,000 for travel from New Guinea, to \$250 for a fern, to \$100 for a spotlight, to \$25 for artists' spending money. As of this writing, a year later, the garden is taking shape. Volunteers have set the poles in cement and installed the stone carvings. Mounds of earth and plants follow New

Guinea landscaping styles. The tallest poles form a "spirit house," and other brightly painted, or elaborately carved, twisting wooden poles and slit gongs are scattered throughout the grove.

At the New Guinea Sculpture Garden, interactive process was as important as the production and collection of "art" or "culture." Although there is a long tradition of bringing exotic people to Western museums, zoos, and world fairs, the sculptors at Stanford were not offered as specimens on display. They were presented as practicing "artists," not as "natives." People could, of course, view them as *exotica*, but this went against the spirit of the project, which invited people to participate, financially and personally, in the making of the garden. The traveling artists pursued their own adventures, collecting prestige, information, and fun, while staying in touch with the Highlands by phone. They made friends from the various communities around Stanford. They were taken to Disneyland and the Esalen Institute, entertained by local firefighters and the WO'SE African Community Church in Oakland. Hundreds of people were at the airport to see them off. Return visits, in both directions, have been planned. A regular visitor to the campus grove: "It is like a miracle dropping here from outer space, in a very lily-white, upper-class community." A carver: "All the people who come are good. People are happy to see us, and they bring us food" (Koh, 1994: 2B).

We can defer, for now, the important issue of how the garden will ultimately be owned and used, and consider how the interactive process of its making opens up a different range of relations from those normally practiced in contexts of collecting and display. Richard Kurin (1991) describes similar phenomena during two exhibitions/performances held on the Mall in Washington, D.C., as part of the 1985 Festival of India. The events were titled "Aditi: A Celebration of Life" and "Mela! An Indian Fair." The former brought rural Indian craftspeople and performers into the national Museum of Natural History; the latter was a "composite fair presenting rituals, crafts, performances, foodways, and commercial traditions from a variety of Indian regions" (319). Kurin details many ways the artisans and street performers shaped and stretched their "exhibition" settings. He also explores the event's different political interests—for the Smithsonian Institution, the Indian government, and the street performers from India. The last-named used the recognition afforded by the trip to Washington to raise their impoverished status at home, to induce politicians to reconsider harsh beggary laws applied to folk artists, and in some

cases to acquire title to land. Kurin's complex account of the happenings on the Mall suggests a utopian space of interaction and performative improvisation, hedged around by caste and class politics in India and by the commodification of "folk" traditions and "culture" in the geopolitical marketplace of national "festivals." Recent Indian immigrants to the United States who translated and assisted at the popular events found themselves identifying with "vulgar" street performances they would have shunned in India. Class and caste hierarchies were leveled, at least for a time, as performers were invited home for meals. Respect for the diversity of Indian subcultures was stimulated. And the sponsoring museum was obliged to modify its objectifying modes of display to accommodate visitors who thought of the occasion as just another fair, this time on the Mall in Washington, D.C. As organizer of the event, Kurin was caught between the needs of the performance and those of institutional order. His daily exhortations to the monkey-men of Mela to get out of the trees, with threats of possible arrest by park police, "were taken neither as official warnings nor as stage directions but as straight lines to be incorporated into the performance routine for the enjoyment of the audience" (324).⁶

Exploitations

It is important to keep the possibilities for subversion and reciprocity (or relatively benign mutual exploitation) in tension with the long history of "exotic" displays in the West. This history provides a context of enduring power imbalance within and against which the contact work of travel, exhibition, and interpretation occurs. An ongoing ideological matrix governs the understanding of "primitive" people in "civilized" places. As Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña discovered when they performed a broad satire in which "undiscovered" Amerindians were confined in a golden cage, more than a few visitors took them literally. Fusco (1994) discerns an "other history" of intercultural performance, which runs from Columbus' kidnapped Arawacs and Montaigne's "cannibals," to populated "villages" and "streets" at world exhibitions, to Ishi at the University of California Anthropological Museum. She extrapolates the history to include all more or less coerced performances of identity: the spectacularization of "natives" in documentary films or the collection of "authentic" Third World art (and artists) for exhibitions such as "Les Magiciens de la Terre" in Paris. A growing body of writing has begun to provide details of

this quite extensive and continuous history of exhibitionary contacts (Ry-
dell, 1984; Bradford and Blume, 1992; Corbey, 1993; Fusco, 1995). It
reveals the racism, or at best the paternalist condescension, of spectacles
which offered up mute, exoticized specimens for curious and titillated
crowds. The degradation was physical as well as moral, not infrequently
resulting in the travelers' untimely deaths. Exhibitions were contact zones
where germs made their own connections.⁷

A wholly appropriate emphasis on coercion, exploitation, and miscom-
prehension does not, however, exhaust the complexities of travel and
encounter.⁸ Montaigne, for example, derived something more than an
ethnocentric *frisson* from his meeting with Tupinamba in Rouen. Even
encounters that are ethnocentric—which they all are to a degree—can
produce reflection and cultural critique. The critical reflections and agency
of the exotic “travelers” are most difficult to discover, given limited records
and a tendency, in what records exist, to accord such travelers *behavior*
rather than independent *expression*. Since they were generally treated as
passive specimens (or victims), their views seldom entered the historical
record. Their “captivity narratives” remain to be discovered or pieced
together, inferred, from historical shreds.⁹ Some of those displayed in
European courts, museums, fairs, and zoos were kidnapped, their travel
anything but voluntary. In many cases, a mix of force and choice was at
work. People lent themselves to the projects of explorers and entrepre-
neurs for a range of reasons, including fear, economic need, curiosity, a
desire for adventure, a quest for power.

“One of my colleagues,” writes Raymond Corbey, “who grew up in
postwar Berlin told me of his astonishment when, as a boy, he came across
an African man whom he had seen only hours before in native attire in
Castan's Panoptikum, now in European clothes on a tramcar, smoking a
cigarette” (Corbey, 1993: 344). Astonishment, mixed perhaps with a sense
of betrayal, was an appropriate response for someone accustomed to a
carefully staged primitivity. But what was the African's attitude to the
movement between racial/ethnic spectacle and common streetcar? Was
acting the “African” an ordeal? A satire? A source of pride? Just a job? All
of these? And more? An adequate answer depends on knowing about
individual histories and specific power relations. In most cases the details
are unavailable. But documentation does exist for a revealing experience
in which native culture was made into a spectacle—an experience which,
though far from typical, can help clarify the social relationships and
different investments at stake.

In 1914 Edward Curtis, the elegiac photographer of North American
Indians, made a feature-length movie called *In the Land of the Headhunters*.
Working on northern Vancouver Island, Curtis hired a large contingent of
Kwakiutl Indians to act in a tale of precontact Northwest Coast life,
complete with boy-meets-girl romance, evil sorcerers, masks, war canoes,
and severed heads. With the help of local authorities—notably George
Hunt, Franz Boas' principal assistant—a serious attempt was made to
re-create authentic traditional settings, artifacts, dances, and ceremonies.
T. C. McLuhan, in her film *The Shadow Catcher* (1975), records the remi-
niscences of three elderly people who participated in Curtis' re-creation.
They recall that it was a lot of fun, dressing up and doing things the old
way. Everybody had a good time. Bill Holm's conversations with other
surviving participants at screenings of the restored film in 1967 confirm
their point (Holm and Quimby, 1980).

In an important sense, the Kwakiutl were exploited by Curtis, made to
act out a stereotype of themselves for white consumption. The sensational
title featuring “headhunters” is indicative of what Fusco argues is the
inescapable violence of such projects. And one wonders: Had the film
been a commercial success, how much of the profit would have found its
way back to northern Vancouver Island? In other important senses, how-
ever, relations were not exploitative. The participants in *Headhunters*
earned good money and enjoyed themselves. They willingly donned wigs,
shaved their mustaches, and endured the tickle of abalone nose-rings.
They knew that Curtis' portrayal of their traditions, while sensational, was
respectful. Spectacle was, after all, very much a part of Kwakiutl culture,
and Curtis tapped a rich tradition of acting. Moreover, George Hunt
played a crucial role in the process, interpreting tradition, recruiting
actors, and gathering costumes and props. Surviving snapshots of the
filming show Curtis behind the camera, with Hunt beside him, holding a
megaphone and directing the action (Holm and Quimby, 1980: 57–61).
By local standards, in the context of prior trade and ethnographic contacts,
Curtis dealt fairly with the communities he mobilized. His interest in a
“vanishing” culture seems to have overlapped productively with their own
interest in a way of life which some knew through their parents and
grandparents and with which they felt a strong continuity through chang-
ing times.¹⁰

The staging of cultural spectacles can thus be a complex contact process
with different scripts negotiated by impresarios, intermediaries, and ac-
tors. Of course Curtis' film, made on native grounds with the assistance

of local authorities, was quite different from the traveling shows and exhibitions, which tended to be more domineering and exploitative. The most famous of all the purveyors of stereotypes, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, was generally sustained by respectful personal relations with its Native American participants. But the conditions of travel were hard, and few stayed for more than a season or two. Some joined the show for the wages it offered (low, but there was no way to make money on the new reservations); others wanted to escape the inaction imposed by "pacification"; occasionally "troublemakers" were sent by the government as an alternative to imprisonment; others wanted to travel and to observe the world of whites (Blackstone, 1986: 85–88). Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux, joined Buffalo Bill for the last-mentioned reason, and his memories of Chicago, New York, London, and Paris provide a precious glimpse of travel and cultural criticism from a native viewpoint (Black Elk, 1979; DeMallie, 1984; see also Standing Bear, 1928). It is critical to recognize that the cultural performances in such spectacles were scripted and their actors frequently exploited. But it is also important to recognize a range of experiences and not to close off dimensions of agency (and irony) in their participation. The crucial issue of power often appears differently at different levels of interaction, and it cannot simply be read off from ascribed geopolitical locations. Power and reciprocity are articulated together in specific ways. Who calls which shots? When? Do structural and interpersonal power relations reinforce or complicate each other? How are differing agendas accommodated in the same project?

On the contemporary scene, the performance of culture and tradition—what Robert Cantwell (1993) calls "ethnomimesis"—may include empowerment and participation in a wider public sphere *as well as* commodification in an increasingly hegemonic game of identity. Why would tribal people be eager to dance in New York or London? Why come to Stanford? Why play the game of self-representation?¹¹ Such visitors, their hosts, and impresarios are not free of colonial legacies of exoticism and neocolonial processes of commodification. Nor are they entirely confined by these repressive structures. It is important to recognize this complexity. For what exceeds the apparatus of coercion and stereotype in contact relations may perhaps be reclaimed for current practice in movements to expand and democratize what can happen in museums and related sites of ethnomimesis. The historical possibilities of contact relations—negative and positive—need to be confronted.

In cases where ^{force}coercion is not direct, when non-Western artists, culture makers, and curators enter Western museums on their own (negotiated) terms, the collection sites of art and anthropology can no longer be understood primarily in terms of Promethean discovery and discerning selection. They become places of crossing, explicit and unacknowledged, occasions for different discoveries and selections. Some illuminating current examples are found in *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale*, interviews conducted by Thomas McEvilley (1993). Tamessir Dia—a Senegalese, born in Mali, raised in Ivory Coast, and educated in France—expresses an African "contact perspective." After noting his admiration for Delacroix, Cézanne, and especially Picasso, Dia adds:

To my perception, what's happening in Europe and America belongs to me. One day someone asked me what I thought about Picasso and other European painters and I said, "In France, I took what belongs to me. Picasso came and took things from my home. I went to France and took things that are mine." For me the European tradition was a way of reunderstanding my own civilization's value, because Europe after the First World War was having a crisis of imagination, a crisis of development in an artistic sense, a cultural sense. And they turned to Africa. I also understand that they used my heritage to develop their own, so why can't I take theirs, whatever is technically useful to me, to express myself?

McEvilley responds: "When you say that you went to France and took what belongs to you, you don't mean that you were taking back purloined elements of African culture but that you were taking elements of European culture which belonged to you in exchange for them." Dia clarifies: "I am not limited to African culture—that would be absurd; it would be ridiculous for any African today to speak of Africanity or Negritude. What you are in everything, it's in your spirit. As an African you can never live exactly like a European—at least the people in my generation" (McEvilley, 1993: 61).

Africa and Europe have been thrown together by destructive and creative histories of empire, commerce, and travel; each uses the other's traditions to remake its own. Pratt (1992: 6), following Fernando Ortiz and Angel Rama, calls such processes "transculturations." Until recently in the West, transculturation has been understood hierarchically, in ways that naturalize a power imbalance and the claim of one group to define history and authenticity. For example, Africans using Europe's heritage

were seen to be imitating, losing their traditions in a zero-sum game of acculturation; Europeans using African cultural resources appeared to be creative, progressive, inclusive modernists. Views such as those of Tamesir Dia suggest a more complex history of translations and appropriations.

Contact history is evoked in two titles—"Africa Explores" and "Digesting the West"—from Susan Vogel's innovative exhibition and catalogue on twentieth-century African art (Vogel, 1991). In this instance a contemporary museum, the Center for African Art in New York, collects work that has, for more than a century, itself been collecting the West through transcultural processes ranging from infatuation and forced feeding to satire, syncretic conversion, and critical selection. The New York museum operates in long-established circuits of travel and transculturation. On the one hand, it replays, in new forms, established practices of discovering, gathering, and valuing art and culture—a restless curatorial exploration and construction of Africa. In this practice it brings peripheral work to an established center, for appreciation and commodification. On the other hand, the Center for African Art increasingly operates in an awareness of Africa as not simply "out there" (or "back then") but as part of a network, a series of relays forming a diaspora that includes New York City. This diaspora has well established, branching routes and roots in slavery, in migration from Caribbean, South American, and rural North American places, and in current circuits of commerce and immigration from the African continent. In this context, the museum's contact work takes on local, regional, hemispheric, and global dimensions. In the center's recent exhibition of African and African American altars, "Face of the Gods," it grappled explicitly with the challenge of exhibiting (in) diaspora. This project brought artist/practitioners of African-based religions into the museum work, both in New York and in the altars' successive gatherings, and changes, on the road.

Africa 95 offers a more extensive example of a contact approach. This extraordinary ensemble of art exhibits, music and dance performances, films, conferences, workshops, residencies, TV and radio shows, and children's events was provoked by a planned exhibition at London's Royal Academy of Arts, "Africa: The Art of a Continent." The Royal Academy project, a major "comprehensive" selection, was conceived according to a classic model: a single European curator gathered what he considered the finest and most representative work, while limiting the exhibition to "art" produced before 1900. The organizers of *Africa 95* in effect folded this

project into a more heterogeneous and future-oriented vision. Without rejecting its historical/aesthetic agenda, they surrounded and decentered it. Instead of bringing art from Africa, *Africa 95* brought artists. It recognized that African artists had long been in contact with Europe and were currently working both within and beyond the African continent, moving in and out of the "West."

The first *Africa 95* event, "Teng/Articulations," was an artist-led workshop in Senegal. It was followed by an "international sculpture workshop" at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, where for three months artists from a dozen African countries joined with artists from the United States and the United Kingdom to create on-site works. More than twenty exhibitions of contemporary African art and photography took place throughout the autumn of 1995 in London and other British cities. These were coordinated with colloquia and extensive film, music, dance, and literature programs. There was a consistent policy of involving Africans as authorities and curators. At the Whitechapel Art Gallery, a counterpoint to the Royal Academy show was titled "Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa." Five of the seven curators were leading African artists and art historians, and their personal visions of modern African art effectively complicated assumptions of a unified continental aesthetic.

Clémentine Deliss, artistic director of *Africa 95*, stressed that the project was conceived not merely as a site of exhibitions, but also of meetings among artists, an occasion for developing ongoing contacts (Deliss, 1995: 5). That the contact zones of *Africa 95* were not political or economic free-spaces is signaled by prominent advertisements for transnational corporate sponsors, notably banks, in the program brochure and by recurring complaints that the event was being held in Britain rather than in Africa (Riding, 1995). Europe still enjoyed the power to collect and exhibit Africa on its own terms and terrain. However, for many of the artists and musicians Europe and America were already sites of work, and the event was an opportunity to expand their audiences and sources of inspiration.

Africa 95, working in and out of museums and galleries, had something in common with the current spate of national festivals (Festival of India, of Indonesia, and so on) in which Third World regions display their arts in First World places with the aim of increasing global legitimacy and attracting investors. But there were major differences. Although corporate sponsors such as CitiBank used the event to portray themselves as good transnational "African" citizens, *Africa 95* did not directly represent any

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major commercial interest or national polity, and its diverse occasions and participants, its stress on cross-national exchanges, were not easily channeled. It did, of course, help produce a modern, hybrid "Africa" as a marketable commodity for international art markets. But this product was, significantly, the contact work of Africans who may profit from it. *Africa* 95 used, and was used by, transnational circuits tied to colonial and neocolonial relations—making spaces for contacts that exceed those relations.

Contestations

The notion of a contact zone, articulated by Pratt in contexts of European expansion and transculturation, can be extended to include cultural relations within the same state, region, or city—in the centers rather than the frontiers of nations and empires. The distances at issue here are more social than geographic. For most inhabitants of a poor neighborhood, located perhaps just blocks or a short bus ride from a fine-arts museum, the museum might as well be on another continent. Contact perspectives recognize that "natural" social distances and segregations are historical/political products: apartheid was a relationship. In many cities, moreover, contact zones result from a different kind of "travel": the arrival of new immigrant populations. As in the colonial examples evoked by Pratt, negotiations of borders and centers are historically structured in dominance. To the extent that museums understand themselves to be interacting with specific communities across such borders, rather than simply educating or edifying a public, they begin to operate—consciously and at times self-critically—in contact histories.

We have seen some of the ways that museum practices of collecting and display look different in a contact perspective. Centers become borders crossed by objects and makers. Such crossings are never "free" and indeed are routinely blocked by budgets and curatorial control, by restrictive definitions of art and culture, by community hostility and miscomprehension. The examples I have chosen so far suggest ways these borders can be more democratically negotiated, a choice reflecting the reformist tenor of my analysis. I could have begun, however, not with border crossings, but with border wars. Two recent disputes have sent shock waves through the museum world in Canada and to a lesser degree the United States: the Lubicon Cree boycott of the "Spirit Sings" exhibition in Calgary, and the

widely publicized conflict over "Into the Heart of Africa" at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, during 1989 and 1990. In both cases, communities whose cultures and histories were at stake in prominent exhibits mobilized to seriously trouble the museum.

"The Spirit Sings, Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples" was organized by the Glenbow Museum in Calgary to coincide with the 1988 Winter Olympics. It brought together a large number of artifacts from collections in Canada and abroad, with the goal of presenting a detailed and diverse picture of Native Canadian cultures at the time of early contact with Europeans. The exhibition further explored the distinctive world view shared by these cultures and their resilience in the face of outside influence and domination (Harrison, 1988). For many, including some Native Canadian groups, the exhibit was successful, though it was criticized for its relative lack of attention to contemporary manifestations of its guiding themes. But the content of "The Spirit Sings" was not, primarily, what provoked a widely supported boycott. The Lubicon Lake Cree of Northern Alberta, to dramatize their pending land-claim, called a boycott of the Winter Olympics, a highly visible political stage. The action focused on the Glenbow Museum because the exhibition's chief sponsor, Shell Oil (which provided \$1.1 million of the exhibition's total budget of \$2.6 million), was drilling on land claimed by the Lubicon. To a growing number of Lubicon supporters, native and nonnative, it was hypocritical for "The Spirit Sings" to celebrate the beauty and continuity of cultures whose current survival was threatened by the exhibit's own corporate sponsor. Supporters of the exhibit pointed out that no museum of any size can survive without corporate or government sponsors, whose hands are never perfectly clean. The museum was being unfairly targeted, dragged without warning into the Lubicons' struggle.

Whatever the different perceptions of fairness and exploitation, the affair raised questions of broad importance. Should museums be able to assemble exhibits of Indian artifacts (including loans from other institutions) without permission from relevant tribal communities? What is involved in control over "cultural property"? What kind of consultation and involvement in planning is proper? (Glenbow had consulted with nearby tribes but not with the Lubicon, who did not respond to a blanket invitation. Curatorial control of the show was, in any event, undiluted.) Must some attention to current issues and struggles be part of any exhibition on native art, culture, or history? Can museums claim political

neutrality? How accountable are they for the activities of their public or private sponsors?¹² In response to these questions, the Canadian Museums Association and the Assembly of First Nations commissioned a Task Force on Museums and First Nations, whose report gained wide acceptance and which established guidelines for collaboration between native representatives and museum staff (Hill and Nicks, 1994). Serious collaboration is now the norm in Canadian exhibitions of First Nations art and culture.

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 "Into the Heart of Africa," at the Royal Ontario Museum, was inspired in part by recent critical writings on the history of collecting and museum display. "Studying the museum as an artifact, reading collections as cultural texts, and discovering life histories of objects," it sought to "understand something of the complexities of cross-cultural encounters" (Cannizzo, 1989: 92). The exhibition's approach was reflexive, relying strongly on juxtaposition and irony. Statements by missionaries and imperial authorities were presented without comment beside African artifacts. The exhibit clearly did not condone the sometimes racist images and words it displayed, nor did it maintain a consistently critical perspective. Objects and images were often left to "speak for themselves." But the attempt to complicate curatorial didacticism backfired. Colonialist perspectives were all too clear in the nineteenth-century quotations and images; African responses remained implicit. People absorbed quite different messages from the presentation. While some visitors found the exhibit provocative, if somewhat confusing in its presentation, others were offended by what they took to be a suspension of criticism that bordered on indifference. Many—though not all—African Canadians who visited the museum were shocked by glorified colonialist images and condescending statements about Africans prominently and apparently uncritically displayed. They were not seduced by an ironic treatment of the violent destruction and appropriation of African cultures. The museum and its guest curator, anthropologist Jeanne Cannizzo, had misjudged the exhibit's discrepant audiences.

A bitter controversy ensued in the media. There were clashes between picketers at the Royal Ontario Museum and the police; all of the museums that were scheduled to host the exhibit during its traveling phase canceled. This is not the place (nor am I well placed) to survey the controversy and adjudicate the extremes of mutual suspicion and miscomprehension that emerged. (See, among others, Ottenberg, 1991; Cannizzo, 1991; Hutchon, 1994; and Mackey, 1995.) "Into the Heart of Africa" was denounced

as racist colonization by other means, part of an ongoing suppression of African achievements and African Canadian experiences. The exhibit's critics were dismissed as narrow ideologues and censors, unable to grasp irony or a complex historical account. The controversy has since rippled through museum contexts, and as Enid Schildkraut, in a sensitive critique, confesses: "It made many of us working in the field of ethnographic exhibitions, particularly African exhibitions, tremble with a sense of 'There but for the grace of God go I.' How could an exhibition have gone so wrong? How could it have offended so many people from different sides of the political spectrum?" (Schildkraut 1991: 16).

The museum became an inescapable contact (conflict) zone. Distinct audiences brought differently attuned historical experiences to "Into the Heart of Africa." M. Nourbese Philip makes this point trenchantly, chastising the museum for missing an opportunity in the controversy to confront its publicly stated goals: to understand the "museum as an artifact" and the "complexities of cross-cultural encounters." The exhibition was clearly not sensitive to African Canadians' stake in the history of white Canadians and the African colonial enterprise. Its story was understood to be continuous with ongoing racist structures in officially "multicultural" Canadian life. African history could not be distanced in time and space. The museum learned, the hard way, about the risks (and Philip insists: the opportunities) of working in relation to an African diaspora within a fissured Canadian public sphere. The exhibit was a "cultural text" that could not be read from a stable location. "The same text resulted in contradictory readings determined by the different life histories and experiences. One reading saw these artifacts as being frozen in time and telling a story about white Canadian exploration of Africa; the other inserted the reader—the African Canadian reader—actively into the text, who then read those artifacts as the painful detritus of savage exploration and attempted genocide of their own people" (Philip, 1992: 105).

Would fuller "consultation" with the relevant "communities" (including the white Canadians whose family histories were at issue) have prevented polarization? Would more explicit narration of an African "side" to the story in the exhibit have helped, as Schildkraut argues? Surely. But Philip sees—as do some museum professionals thinking in the wake of "The Spirit Sings" and "Into the Heart of Africa"—that structures of power are fundamentally at stake (Ames, 1991: 12–14). Until museums do more than consult (often after the curatorial vision is firmly in place), until they

bring a wider range of historical experiences and political agendas into the actual planning of exhibits and the control of museum collections, they will be perceived as merely paternalistic by people whose contact history with museums has been one of exclusion and condescension. It may, indeed, be utopian to imagine museums as public spaces of collaboration, shared control, complex translation, and honest disagreement. Indeed, the current proliferation of museums may reflect the fact that, as historically evolved, such institutions tend to reflect unified community visions rather than overlapping, discrepant histories. But few communities, even the most "local," are homogeneous. In practice, different groups may come together around a specific issue or antagonism (as many African Canadians did in response to the Royal Ontario Museum), yet divide on others. The tribal response to "The Spirit Sings" was not uniform. And on certain issues, black Canadians whose families have been in Canada for two centuries may differ from people with close connections to places in the Caribbean or from Africans who have recently arrived. On the general issue of Africa and colonial history, they may share a common outrage. But when practical problems of interpretation and emphasis, issues of repatriation and compensation, are raised, the unanimity can dissolve.

Who, after all, is best qualified by "experience" (what kinds?), by depth and breadth of knowledge (what knowledges?), to control and interpret an African collection? African Canadians who have never been to Africa and who may hold an idealized vision of its cultures? White anthropologists and curators who have spent considerable time on the continent and have studied its history in depth, but have never viscerally known racism or colonization? Contemporary Africans? (From which ethnicity, nation, or region? Living in Africa? In Canada?) Sometimes, as in the case of the Tlingit at the Portland Museum of Art, the connection of current community members to old objects is very direct. In other cases, what is at issue is "cultural property" or a more distant "historical" relationship. Since communities and collections are seldom unified, museums may have to address sharply discrepant publics.

Clearly, there is no easy solution to these problems, no formula based on unassailable principle. Neither community "experience" nor curatorial "authority" has an automatic right to the contextualization of collections or to the narration of contact histories. The solution is inevitably contingent and political: a matter of mobilized power, of negotiation, of representation constrained by specific audiences. To evade this reality—resist-

ing "outside" pressures in the name of aesthetic quality or scientific neutrality, raising the specter of "censorship"—is self-serving as well as historically uninformed. Community pressures have always been part of institutional, public life. Museums routinely adapt to the tastes of an assumed audience—in major metropolitan institutions, largely an educated, bourgeois, white audience. National sensibilities are respected, the exploits and connoisseurship of dominant groups celebrated. Donors and trustees exercise very real "oversight" (a more polite word than "censorship") on what kinds of exhibits a museum can mount. One has no difficulty imagining the drying up of grants, donations, and bequests that would follow, should a major museum adopt a consistently critical stance toward the art market or a view of American or Canadian history that gave a prominent, permanent place to the perspectives of economically, racially, or colonially oppressed people.¹³

Museums do not like to offend their publics, especially the sources of their material support. In normal, "nonpoliticized" times, this accountability to particular interests and tastes is simply business as usual. It is only when curatorial perspective and social location are challenged by a differently interested public (as in debates about the 1987 "Hispanic Art" exhibit at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, for example), or when an exhibit's message offends powerful constituencies (the Smithsonian's recent critical view of the American frontier; the Hiroshima / Enola Gay display), or when communities are publicly divided over a proposal (whether or not to include a slave market at colonial Williamsburg) that things are perceived as "political." But such debates and negotiations are inherent in the contact work of museums. More than ever before, curators reckon with the fact that the objects and interpretations they display "belong" to others as well as to the museum.

Ownership and control of collections have never been absolute; individual donors routinely attach conditions to their gifts. But now communities that are socially distant from the museum world can effectively constrain the display and interpretation of objects representing their cultures. In contemporary Canada and the United States, at least, there are strong, overtly political limits on how Native American, Latino, or African American art can be displayed and interpreted. Emerging notions of "cultural property" impinge on abstract assumptions about freedom of ownership. Of course, major museums have never owned their artworks in quite the same way that an individual does. Their collections are held

in trust for a wider community—defined as a city, class, caste or elite, nation, or projected global community of high culture. The objects in a museum are often treated as a patrimony, someone's cultural property. But whose? Which communities (defined by class, nationality, race) have a stake in them? Carol Duncan's research on the history of the Louvre, an institution that has served as a model for major museums throughout the world, shows how its transition from palace to museum was linked to the creation of a "public" in postrevolutionary France, the development of a secular, national community (Duncan, 1991, 1995). The homogeneity of such a public is currently at issue in struggles over multiculturalism and equality of representation. Borders traverse the dominant national or cultural spaces, and museums that once articulated the cultural core or high ground now appear as sites of passage and contestation.

In counterpoint with the decentering of established institutions, alternate "museums" make new demands on the contact work of managing and interpreting patrimonies, cultural traditions, and histories. Tribal museums and minority cultural centers collect and exhibit community productions in ways that both overlap with and diverge from the practices of more conventional museums (see Canadian Museums Association, 1990; Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine, 1992; and Chapter 5, above). Community museums / cultural centers (the distinction may be blurred or irrelevant) are differently centered, expressing partial histories and locally inflected aesthetic, cultural contexts. The fact that an altar or a tribal mask can mean quite different things in different locations makes inescapable the recognition and display of multiple contexts for works of art or culture. Innovative museum professionals have long been interested in ways to put objects in a fresh light, to make them new. Explicit contact relations now place this kind of search in a different conjuncture, imposing new collaborations and alliances. Thus, the multiplication of contexts becomes less about discovery and more about negotiation, less a matter of creative curators having good ideas, doing research, consulting indigenous experts, and more a matter of responding to actual pressures and calls for representation in a culturally complex civil society.

Contact work in a museum thus goes beyond consultation and sensitivity, though these are very important. It becomes active collaboration and a sharing of authority. This development is clearly traced in Fath Davis Ruffins' excellent survey of forms of cultural memory, the black museum movement, and the (partial) entry of African American professionals into

historically white museums in the United States (1992). From the standpoint of museum professionals, it is one thing to call on one's "native informant" and quite another to work with a co-curator.¹⁴ In matters of minority or tribal art, collaboration entails complex processes that Charlotte Townsend-Gault has described in terms of culturally and politically limited translation work and the tactical negotiation of boundaries (Townsend-Gault, 1995; see also Irving and Harper, 1988; Ames, 1991; González and Tonelli, 1992).

One of the most difficult areas of negotiation around tribal objects and colonial histories concerns repatriation. In a contact perspective, the movement of objects out of tribal places into metropolitan museums would be an expected outcome of colonial dominance. Such movements would not be confused with progress or with preservation (a kind of immobility/immortality) in a cultural "center." In contact zones, cultural appropriations are always political and contestable, cross-cut by other appropriations, actual or potential. Museums and the market manage the travel of art objects between different places. Objects of value cross from a tribal world to a museum world as a result of political, economic, and intercultural relations that are not permanent. For example, a powerful tradition of collecting in the salvage mode has long been justified by the idea that authentic tribal productions are doomed: their future can only be either local destruction or preservation in the hands of knowing collectors, conservators, and scientists. But it is harder now to see the destiny of collections as a linear teleology of this sort (Clifford, 1987). By positing the disappearance of tribal worlds, salvage collecting presumed (and to an extent created) the rarity of "authentic" tribal art. Some tribal communities did indeed disappear, often violently. Others hung on, against terrible pressures. Sometimes this meant putting on camouflage, coming out of hiding when the situation was less repressive. Others changed, finding new ways to be different. In light of these diverse histories, the notion that indigenous artworks somehow *belong* in majority (scientific or fine-art) museums is no longer self-evident. Objects in museums can still go elsewhere.

Repatriation of tribal works is not the only proper response to contact histories, relations which cannot always be reduced to colonial oppression and appropriation. But it is a possible, appropriate route. And although the return of objects may be a fortunate homecoming, it is not always obvious where home is for collected objects. The situation can be com-

plicated and ambiguous.¹⁵ Indeed, some native groups do not want physical possession of traditional objects; they simply want ongoing connection and control. In practice, the notion of cultural property can mean that a metropolitan or state museum holds collections in trust for specific communities. Indeed, some museums may come to resemble a depository and lending library, circulating art and culture beyond their walls—with varying constraints—to local museums or community centers and even for use in current ritual life (Blundell and Grant, 1989). This is relatively easy to imagine between national and tribal or ethnic museums. But can a museum allow art and artifact to travel in and out of the “world of museums” (an emerging network considerably larger than what is usually called the “museum world”)? Movement of collections in and out of the world of museums is still quite difficult for curators and boards of directors to accept, given the traditional economy and mission of the Western museum. It would require breaking with strong traditions of conservatism. For example, shudders were surely felt by many museum professionals over the recent repatriations of Zuni war-god figures, *Ahauutas*, which are now rotting on secret mesa tops, completing their interrupted traditional life journey.

This history of rotting sculptures—a story of destruction for one culture and of renewal for another—is one possible travel story for repatriated objects. There are others. As we saw in Chapter 5, an important potlatch collection recently returned to Kwagiulth clans on Vancouver Island ended up in two tribal museums. As a condition for relinquishing the objects, the conservation-minded museum world successfully extended itself into the tribal world. But at the same time, the tribal world appropriated and transculturated the museum, along with the very notion of the “collection” and the kinds of cultural/aesthetic/political meanings it could embody. In this new, hybrid context the museum becomes a cultural center and a site of storytelling, of indigenous history, and of ongoing tribal politics. It is also caught up with Fourth World tribal circuits, with “cultural tourism” by natives and whites, and with commercial tourism at regional, national, and international levels.

“Museums” increasingly work the borderlands between different worlds, histories, and cosmologies. Is the Kwagiulth U'mista Cultural Centre a museum? Yes and no. An art museum? Yes and no. Is the San Francisco Galeria de la Raza a museum? Yes and no.¹⁶ Contact zones—places of hybrid possibility and political negotiation, sites of exclusion and strug-

gle—are clear enough when we consider tribal or minority institutions, but what would it take (and why would it matter?) to treat the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan as a contact zone rather than a center? Or the Louvre? To give marginal, “between” places a tactical centrality is ultimately to undermine the very notion of a center. All sites of collection begin to seem like places of encounter and passage. Seen this way, objects currently in the great museums are travelers, crossers—some strongly “diasporic” with powerful, still very meaningful, ties elsewhere. Moreover, the “major” museums increasingly organize themselves according to the dictates of tourism, national and international. This rethinking of collections and displays as unfinished historical processes of travel, of crossing and recrossing, changes one’s conception of patrimony and public. What would be different if major regional or national museums loosened their sense of centrality and saw themselves as specific places of transit, intercultural borders, contexts of struggle and communication between discrepant communities? What does it mean to work within these entanglements rather than striving to transcend them?

Such questions evoke some of the conflicting demands currently felt by museums in multicultural and multiracial societies. By thinking of their mission as contact work—decentered and traversed by cultural and political negotiations that are out of any imagined community’s control—museums may begin to grapple with the real difficulties of dialogue, alliance, inequality, and translation.

In the World of Museums

My account of museums as contact zones is both descriptive and prescriptive. I have argued that it is inadequate to portray museums as collections of universal culture, repositories of uncontested value, sites of progress, discovery, and the accumulation of human, scientific, or national patrimonies. A contact perspective views all culture-collecting strategies as responses to particular histories of dominance, hierarchy, resistance, and mobilization. And it helps us see how claims to both universalism and to specificity are related to concrete social locations. As Raymond Williams showed in *Culture and Society* (1966), nineteenth-century bourgeois articulations of a high/universal “culture” were responses to industrial change and social threat. Conversely, “minority” and “tribal” articulations of a discrete culture and history respond to histories of exclusion and

silencing. They claim a locally controlled place in the broader public culture, while speaking both within particular communities and to a wider array of audiences. Museums/cultural centers can provide sites for such articulations.

My account argues for a democratic politics that would challenge the hierarchical valuing of different places of crossing. It argues for a decentralization and circulation of collections in a multiplex public sphere, an expansion of the range of things that can happen in museums and museum-like settings. It sees the inclusion of more diverse arts, cultures, and traditions in large, established institutions as necessary but not as the only or primary point of intervention. Indeed, any pluralist vision of full inclusivity at privileged sites (such as the Mall in Washington, D.C.—a national museum of museums) is questioned.¹⁷ A contact perspective argues for the local/global specificity of struggles and choices concerning inclusion, integrity, dialogue, translation, quality, and control. And it argues for a distribution of resources (media attention, public and private funding) that recognizes diverse audiences and multiply centered histories of encounter. Given the history of museums in the Euro-American bourgeois state and indeed in national contexts everywhere, this view may seem utopian. It is utopia in a minor key, a vision of uneven emergence and local encounter rather than of global transformation. It makes a place for strong, if precarious, initiatives that pull against established hierarchical legacies.

These legacies have recently been subjected to searching critical and historical analysis. The growth of public museums in nineteenth-century Europe and America was part of a general attempt to purvey and organize "culture" from the top down. Museums accumulated the "symbolic capital" of traditional and emergent elites (Bourdieu, 1984). They institutionalized a hardening distinction between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" activities (Levine, 1988). The "publics" whom they addressed and whose "patrimonies" they collected were constituted by bourgeois nationalist projects (Duncan, 1991). In the nineteenth century, a series of important "legislative and administrative reforms . . . transformed museums from semi-private institutions restricted largely to the ruling and professional classes into major organs of the state dedicated to the instruction and edification of the general public" (Bennett, 1988: 63). In the twentieth century, museums have been central to the production and consumption of "heritage" in a dizzying range of local, national, and transnational

contexts (Walsh, 1992), integral elements in expansive tourist industries (MacCannell, 1976; Horne, 1984; Urry 1990). As an institution that emerged with the national, bourgeois state and with industrial and commercial capitalism, the museum's destiny is linked to their global diffusion and local adaptations.

The link with capitalist marketing and commodification has been traced by Neil Harris (1990) in his provocative comparison of museums and department stores in nineteenth- and twentieth-century North America. By the 1940s, he argues, museums had been widely eclipsed by commercial emporia as sites for the display of art and objects and for the edification of popular taste. But recently many major museums have become more consumer-oriented, with a concomitant change of image.

If attractiveness and public appeal become the museum's objectives, how in effect does it differ from any commercial institution which exists chiefly for the purpose of selling? . . . Has the museum, a new entertainment palace, become merely another asylum, an asylum not for objects and art but for special kinds of memory baths and gallery-going rituals, a quantified, certified, collective encounter that may shape purchase patterns but hardly improve them? At one time, museums were charged with paying too little attention to the wants and needs of millions of laymen. Now, in another era, they are taxed with pandering to delight in relevance, drama, and popularity. (Harris, 1990: 81)

However these developments are evaluated, and whatever possibilities of cultural/political advocacy are opened up by the increasingly frank abandonment of older ideals of aesthetic and scientific neutrality (95), Harris concludes that "the changing fortunes of the museum as a public influence suggest capacities that are great, growing, and endowed with almost infinite variation" (81).¹⁸

The "museum" Harris refers to is a Western, largely metropolitan institution. But his vision of a dynamic, consumer-oriented machine for gathering and displaying objects of artistic, cultural, and commercial value has evident global ramifications. The "flexible accumulation" (Harvey, 1989) of traditions, identities, arts, and styles associated with contemporary capitalist expansion supports the proliferation of museums in what might cynically be called a global department store of cultures. Kevin Walsh (1992) develops this general perspective in a trenchant critique of "museums and heritage in a postmodern world." Walsh extends David

Harvey's view of globalizing capitalist culture: a relentless erosion of "place," of local and continuous senses of collective time, and the substitution of shallow, spectacular, and merely nostalgic conceptions of the past. Heritage replaces history, contributing to a hegemonic articulation of national and class interests. Building on Robert Hewison's *The Heritage Industry* (1987), Walsh grounds the recent rapid growth of museums in Britain in a period of industrial/imperial decline and Thatcherite retrenchment. He finds similar neoliberal hegemonies at work wherever changing societies, engaged with expansive capitalism, represent and consume their past as heritage. The commodification of local pasts is part of a global process of cultural "de-differentiation."

Walsh and Harvey's analysis of the "postmodern" marketing of heritage is a necessary, but not a sufficient, account of the many activities happening in and through museums. A contact perspective, as Pratt argues, complicates diffusionist models, whether they be celebratory (the march of civilization and Western exploration) or critical (the relentless spread of capitalist commodity systems). Walsh recognizes, at times, that his approach oversimplifies, and he cites Mike Featherstone's caution: "The binary logic which seeks to comprehend culture via the mutually exclusive terms of homogeneity/heterogeneity, integration/disintegration, unity/diversity, must be discarded. At best, these conceptual pairs work on one face only of the complex prism which is culture" (Featherstone, 1990: 2). The burden of Walsh's account falls, however, on the first terms of the series.¹⁹

With different political valences, museums express the interests of nation-states, of local and tribal communities, of transnational capital. Wherever local custom, tradition, art (elite or popular), history, science, and technology are collected and displayed—for purposes of prestige, political mobilization, commemoration, tourism, or education—museums and museum-like institutions can be expected to emerge. The spaces of collection, recollection, and display marked by the term "museum" are multiplex and transculturated. Different histories lead into these contact spaces, different engagements with modernity/postmodernity, different "nostalgias" (Stewart, 1988; Ivy, 1995). Tribal "museums," for example, reflect indigenous as well as Western forms of accumulation, memory, and display. They project a vision of history as struggle, survival, renewal, and ongoing difference. Barnaby and Hall (1990) provide an informative account of the Dene Cultural Institute, initiated in 1986 by delegates of the

informative account

Dene Nation representing the Gwich'in, Slavery, Dogrib, Chipewyan, and Cree peoples of Canada's Northwest Territories. The institute reflects a conscious tribal decision to preserve and restore Dene culture as part of a movement for aboriginal rights and control of resource development. The institute has been concerned with oral history, language revitalization, traditional medicine, land use, public education, and collection of archives and artifacts. An exhibition space for Dene materials is planned. Here, clearly, the museum function is integral to the larger work of a cultural center. It is crucial to be attentive to the interrelation, relative weight, and political impetus of these functions in different institutional articulations of heritage.²⁰

Compare Schildkraut's account (1996) of the opening of the Asante Manhyia Palace Museum in Ghana, a very different assertion of traditional, here royal, authority. Alternate visions of tradition and modernity may be expressed in museums to the extent that they reflect local initiatives and embody real alliances and conversations between community members and outside professionals—the ideal of Georges-Henri Rivière's "eco-museum" (Rivière, 1985). And within dominant national contexts, important distinctions can be made in the production and consumption of "heritage." As Tony Bennett has noted, the politics of British conservation has generally been conservative—an assumption that Raphael Samuel (1995) complicates. Australia, however, offers a different "official" context. A museum such as the Sydney Hyde Park Barracks reflects the inclusive politics of Labor's "new nationalism." By taking up residence in buildings originally built to house transported criminals, the museum announced its intention to represent Australian histories that were excluded from more celebratory, consensualist visions (Bennett, 1988: 80).

Why have museum practices proved so mobile, so productive in different locations? Several interlocking factors are at work. The ability to articulate identity, power, and tradition is critical, linking the institution's aristocratic origins with its modern nationalist and "culturalist" disseminations. Museums also resonate with a broad range of vernacular activities of collecting, display, and entertainment. Accumulating and displaying valued things is, arguably, a very widespread human activity not limited to any class or cultural group. Within broad limits, a museum can accommodate different systems of accumulation and circulation, secrecy and communication, aesthetic, spiritual, and economic value. How its "public" or "community" is defined, what individual, group, vision, or ideology it

celebrates, how it interprets the phenomena it presents, how long it remains in place, how rapidly it changes—all these are negotiable. Gathering an individual's or a group's treasures and history in a museum overlaps with practices such as collecting memorabilia, making a photo album, or maintaining an altar. In some cases, museums are sustained with relatively few resources: the energy of a local collector/enthusiast and some volunteers. Communities or individuals who might have traditionally expressed their sense of identity and power by holding a festival or building a shrine or church may now (also) support a museum.

In a global context where collective identity is increasingly represented by having a culture (a distinctive way of life, tradition, form of art, or craft), museums make sense. They presume an external audience (national and international connoisseurs, tourists, scholars, curators, "sophisticated" travelers, journalists, and the like). These may not be the sole or even the primary audience for cultural displays and performances, but they are never entirely absent. When a community displays itself through spectacular collections and ceremonies, it constitutes an "inside" and an "outside." The message of identity is directed differently to members and to outsiders—the former invited to share in the symbolic wealth, the latter maintained as onlookers, or partially integrated, whether connoisseurs or tourists. From their emergence as public institutions in nineteenth-century Europe, museums have been useful for politics gathering and valuing an "us." This articulation—whether its scope is national, regional, ethnic, or tribal—collects, celebrates, memorializes, values, and sells (directly and indirectly) a way of life. In the process of maintaining an imagined community, it also confronts "others" and excludes the "inauthentic." This is the stuff of contemporary cultural politics, creative and virulent, enacted in the overlapping historical contexts of colonization/decolonization, nation formation / minority assertions, capitalist market expansion / consumer strategies.

The "world of museums" is diverse and dynamic. To varying degrees, the different contact zones I have been tracking partake of a postmodern marketing of heritage, the display of identity as culture or art. And there is no doubt that the museum-structure of culture—objectified tradition, construed as moral/aesthetic value and marketable commodity—is increasingly widespread. Aspirations of both dominant and subaltern populations can be articulated through this structure, along with the material interests of national and transnational tourism. To "have" a culture, Rich-

ard Handler has argued (1985, 1993), is to be a collector, caught up in the game of possessing and selectively valuing ways of life. But how completely caught? What else goes on in tribal and other local articulations of culture? How unified is the constellation of cultural/economic formations we call the postmodern? . . . The world system? . . . Late capitalism? Let us not foreclose too soon. Museums, those symbols of elitism and staid immobility, are proliferating at a remarkable rate: from new national capitals to Melanesian villages, from abandoned coal pits in Britain, to ethnic neighborhoods in global cities. Local/global contact zones, sites of identity-making and transculturation, of containment and excess, these institutions epitomize the ambiguous future of "cultural" difference.

identity of museum
2/15/13

etc

very good !!

to museum
atol.