

From Ethnology to Heritage: The Role of the Museum

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During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, there was a close fit between ethnology as a knowledge formation, collections, and museums, whether museums of natural history, museums of ethnology or Völkerkunde or Volkskunde or *les arts et traditions populaires*. The museum was the home for these fields, indeed for any field whose research produces and requires collections, including archaeology, biology, and geology, among others. During the twentieth century and especially after World War II, the situation changed, as the knowledge formations, in our case ethnology, moved into the university, leaving their collections behind. Museum became custodians of the collections of outmoded scientific disciplines. In reinventing themselves, museums have become agents of “heritage.”

My remarks are organized around the following themes:

- Heritage is metacultural
- Tangible and intangible heritage
- Repudiation as an enabling condition
- Ethnology’s heritage
- Museum’s heritage

Heritage is metacultural

I define heritage as a mode of cultural production that has recourse to the past and produces something new. Heritage as a mode of cultural production adds value to the outmoded by making it into an exhibition of itself. Central to my argument is the notion that heritage is created through metacultural operations that extend museological values and methods (collection, documentation, preservation, presentation, evaluation, and interpretation) to living persons, their knowledge, practices, artifacts, social worlds, and life spaces. Heritage professionals use concepts, standards, and regulations to bring cultural phenomena and practitioners into the heritage sphere, where they become metacultural artifacts, whether “Living National Treasures” or “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” At the same time, the performers, ritual specialists, and artisans whose “cultural assets” become heritage through this process experience a new relationship to those assets, a metacultural relationship to what was once just habitus. Habitus refers here to the taken for granted, while heritage refers to the self-conscious selection of valued objects and practices. The power of heritage is precisely that it is curated, which is why heritage is more easily harmonized with human rights and democratic values than is culture. UNESCO stipulates that only those aspects of culture that are compatible with such values can be considered for world heritage designation.

Unlike things, animals, and plants, people are not only objects of cultural preservation but also subjects. They are not only cultural carriers and transmitters (the terms are unfortunate, as is masterpiece), but also agents in the heritage enterprise itself. What the heritage protocols do not generally account for is a conscious, reflexive subject. UNESCO's declaration and conventions on intangible heritage speak of collective creation. Performers are carriers, transmitters, and bearers of traditions, terms which connote a passive medium, conduit, or vessel, without volition, intention, or subjectivity.

Living archive or library are common metaphors. Such terms do not assert a person's right to what they do, but rather their role in keeping the culture going (for others). According to this model, people come and go, but culture persists, as one generation passes it along to the next. But, all heritage interventions—like the globalizing pressures they are trying to counteract—change the relationship of people to what they do. They change how people understand their culture and themselves. They change the fundamental conditions for cultural production and reproduction. Needless to say, change is intrinsic to culture, and measures intended to preserve, conserve, safeguard, and sustain particular cultural practices are caught between freezing the practice and addressing the inherently processual nature of culture.

Heritage interventions attempt to slow the rate of change. *The Onion*, a humor newspaper in the United States with a national readership, published a satirical article entitled “U.S. Dept. of Retro Warns: ‘We May Be Running Out of Past.’”¹ The article quotes U.S. Retro Secretary Anson Williams: “If current levels of U.S. retro consumption are allowed to continue unchecked, we may run entirely out of past by as soon as 2005” and “We are talking about a potentially devastating crisis situation in which our society will express nostalgia for events which have yet to occur.” In support of these predictions, the article explains that “The National Retro Clock currently stands at 1990, an alarming 74 percent closer to the present than ten years ago, when it stood at 1969.” As the retro clock speeds up, life becomes heritage almost before it has a chance to be lived and heritage fills the life space.

The asynchrony of historical, heritage, and habitus clocks (and in particular the differential temporalities of things, persons, and events) produces a paradox, namely, *the possession of heritage as a mark of modernity*, which is the very condition of possibility for the world heritage enterprise. The contemporaneous becomes—or rather, is at one and the same time—contemporary, to invoke the distinction made by Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other*.² The dilemma for projects to safeguard intangible heritage, which requires human actors to commit themselves to embodying the knowledge, so designated and to maintaining embodied practices, is how to reconcile the valorization of customary practices with a program of personal and social transformation. The result is a transvaluation that “preserves” custom without preserving the “custom-bound” self. Indeed, heritage becomes a resource in the project of fashioning the self.³

Tangible and Intangible Heritage

Museums, while repositories of tangible heritage in the form of artifact collections, have always had to address the intangible aspects of culture—indigenous knowledge, belief systems, techniques of the body, performance. And, as those creating world heritage policy now realize, particularly within UNESCO, the division between tangible, natural, and intangible heritage is arbitrary, though not without its history and logic. Nonetheless to designate embodied knowledge and practices “intangible” is to define them by what

they are not (they are *not* tangible) and to maintain the primacy of tangibility as an organizing concept in heritage theory and practice. That said, those dealing with natural heritage increasingly argue that most of the sites on the world natural heritage list are what they are by virtue of human interaction with the environment. Similarly, tangible heritage, without intangible heritage, is a mere husk or inert matter, objects that are not yet things.⁴ As for intangible heritage, it is not only embodied, but also inseparable from persons and their material and social worlds. “Africa loses a library when an old man dies,” a quotation from Hampaté Bâ, appears on the opening page for the UNESCO’s Intangible Heritage page.⁵ While affirming the person, the library metaphor confuses archive and repertoire, a distinction that is particularly important to an understanding of intangible heritage as embodied knowledge and practice. In contrast with the tangible heritage protected in the museum, intangible heritage consists of cultural manifestations (knowledge, skills, performance) that are inextricably linked to persons. It is not possible—or it is not as easy—to treat such manifestations as proxies for persons, even with recording technologies that can separate performances from performers and consign the repertoire to the archive.

According to Diana Taylor, the repertoire is always embodied and is always manifested in performance, in action, in doing.⁶ The repertoire is passed on through performance. This is different from recording and preserving documentation of the repertoire in the archive. The repertoire is about embodied knowledge and the social relations for its creation, enactment, transmission, and reproduction. It follows, according to UNESCO, that intangible heritage is particularly vulnerable precisely because it is intangible, although the historical record does not necessarily bear this out. Though the situation today is of a different order, Australian aborigines maintained their “intangible heritage” for over 30,000 years without the help of cultural policy and the monumental Bahmian Buddhas were reduced to dust in an instant.

While the categories of tangible and intangible heritage distinguish things from events (and from knowledge, skills, and values), even things are events. First, as existential philosopher Stanley Eveling has remarked, “A thing is a slow event.” This is a perceptual issue. The perception of change is a function of the relationship between the actual rate of change and “the windows of our awareness.”⁷ Things are events, not inert or deteriorating substance, in other senses as well. A thing can be an “affecting presence,” in the words of Robert Plant Armstrong.⁸

Moreover, many things are renewable or replaceable under specified conditions. Every twenty years, the wooden sanctuaries at Ise Jingu, a sacred shrine in Japan, are rebuilt. The process takes about eight years, and the shrine has been rebuilt sixty-one times since the first rebuilding in 690. Known as “shikinen sengu,” this tradition involves not only construction, but also ceremony and transmission of specialized knowledge: “The carpentry work is carried out by about one hundred men, the majority of whom are local carpenters who set aside their usual work for a privileged period of two to four years. No nails are used in the entire structure. Although the plans exist for every structure, the master carpenters must remember and pass on to apprentices their expert knowledge of how to put together the complex joints, using ancient and unfamiliar tools.”⁹ This shrine represents “2000 Years of History, Yet Never Gets Older than 20.” Ise Jingu is a slow event.

As the Ise Jingu shrine demonstrates, intangibility and evanescence, which are, after all, conditions of all experience, should not be confused with disappearance or extinction.

This is a case of misplaced concreteness or literal thinking. Conversations are intangible and evanescent, but that does not make the phenomenon of conversation vulnerable to disappearance. This is true of much that is considered intangible heritage, namely performances of all kinds. On the contrary, it could be said that because they cannot be collected, in the way that objects can be collected, because they cannot be preserved, in the way that a house can be preserved, meals and stories and songs have to be done—they have to be performed—over and over again. Indeed, the willed ephemerality of things—the destruction of the Ise Jingu shrine, for example, and commitment to rebuilding it every twenty years—intensifies the need to maintain the embodied knowledge, the practices, which are required for making it in the first place. Ephemerality gives to things their processual and eventful character, while evanescence is the enabling condition for performing over and over again, which is itself the enabling condition for the maintenance, transmission, and reproduction of embodied knowledge. The principle: use it or lose it.

Finally, the possession of heritage—as opposed the way of life that heritage safeguards—is an instrument of modernization and mark of modernity. “To have no museums in today’s circumstances is to admit that one is below the minimum level of civilization required of a modern state.”¹ Indeed, museums are one instrument for the “safeguarding” of heritage, as understood by UNESCO. Safeguarding, it should be noted, requires specialized skills that are different from the practices that are to be safeguarded. There is a difference between doing the practice and doing something about it, between performing a song and recording it. Safeguarding efforts produce heritage workers, who may or may not also be heritage practitioners.

While persistence in old life ways may not be economically viable and may well be inconsistent with economic development and with national ideologies, the valorization of those lifeways as heritage (and the integration of heritage into economies of cultural tourism) is economically viable, consistent with economic development theory, and can be brought into line with national ideologies of cultural uniqueness and modernity. Fundamental to this process is the heritage economy as a modern economy. For this and other reasons, *heritage may well be preferred to the pre-heritage culture that it is intended to safeguard*. Such is the case at the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawai’i, a Mormon operation where, since 1963, students at Brigham Young University-Hawaii “keep alive and share their island heritage with visitors while working their way through school.”¹⁰

Repudiation as an Enabling Condition

Such cases point to the troubled history of museums and heritage as agents of deculturation, as the final resting place for evidence of the success of missionizing and colonizing efforts, among others, that preserve (in the museum) what was wiped out (in the community). Today’s museums and heritage interventions may attempt to reverse course, but there is no way back, only a metacultural way forward.

The operations just described are the enabling conditions for the field of ethnology and for the museums dedicated to this science. This is a story of alienation, detachment, and repudiation thanks to the civilizing, colonizing, missionizing, reformation, and revolutionary projects that produce cultural outtakes in the form of dispositions and practices whose very outmodedness has made them safe for handling, studying, and display. We have here what Steven Mullaney calls the rehearsal of culture, by which he

means the foreclosure of what is collected and displayed. This is the enabling condition for ethnology, its collections, and their display. *The enabling condition is willed disappearance through a process of removal, followed by the display of what has been made to disappear, as a foreclosure of it.*

This is a first step in an ongoing process of devaluation and revaluation, a process that alters the world by purging it of objects associated with pagan religions, primitive peoples, Catholicism, and subsistence lifestyles, in the name of salvation, civilization, Protestantism, and economic development, as in the case of the Congo, as described by Lotten Gustafsson in her paper at this conference on the 12,000 Congo objects collected by the Swedish Missionary Society for the Swedish National Museum of Natural Science at the turn of the century. There, as in the Torres Straits and elsewhere, missionaries had the islanders pile their sacred objects in a heap and set them on fire, after reserving some of them for museums in Europe. Removal of objects was one step in the process of stripping subject peoples of their culture in order to convert them, modernize them, or otherwise transform them in a grand rite of separation. Ethnology, as the handmaiden of colonialism, was governed not only by intellectual concerns internal to the discipline, but also by the practical concerns of better administering by studying those who were to be governed.

The success of these efforts produced a kind of crisis for ethnology to the degree that it created a disappearing subject, decimated both demographically and culturally. Imminent disappearance, an ever advancing eleventh hour, energized salvage anthropology and a revaluation of that which was sufficiently endangered to be safe for appreciation. Salvage anthropologists, particularly those who studied Native Americans, rushed to salvage what remained, that is, to record and collect, this time in the spirit of preserving in the museum and the archive, what was disappearing in the world. *Disappearance was and continues to be an enabling condition.*

Ethnology's Heritage

Heritage, it could be said, is the opposite of ethnology. Heritage is predicated on a different set of claims. But, ethnology is deeply implicated in the production of heritage, first, for the historical reasons outlined above—its role in making culture disappear and then salvaging what remains—and, second, because of ethnology's own complicated relationship to its own past.

There is a double move here, two alienations. The first alienation occurs when ethnology makes culture disappear in the world and reappear, as ethnology, in the museum. The second alienation occurs when ethnology repudiates its own history, particularly as a museum field and in the museum itself.

Shame—and its other face—moral indignation are enabling conditions to the degree that they create a relationship, a strong affective and moral relationship, to that which has become a marker of ethnology's spoiled identity. In remaking itself, ethnology had to remake its relationship to its own past as well as to the present of the people they had studied.

Shifts in ethnology as a discipline—less interest in the tangible (material culture), more interest in the intangible and the theoretical—brought about a disarticulation of what was once a tight integration of knowledge formation, collection, and museum. These shifts

also produced a peculiar asynchrony, as ethnology shifted from the museum to the university, forged ahead with its theories, enlarged its field of inquiry to include contemporary society, and, in a postcolonial era, faced its problematic past, while museums because the custodians of the collections and displays of an outmoded ethnology—that is, museums of ethnology became museums of ethnology’s own “heritage.” The devaluation of the scientific value of ethnographic collections—as ethnology moves on to other concerns—prepares the way for their revaluation as heritage, in a double sense: the heritage of those from whom those objects were taken and the heritage of ethnology itself.

Consider the so-called Bushman Diorama, the most popular exhibit at the South Africa Museum in Capetown. This diorama has auratic power in its own right, which is precisely what makes it so dangerous. Not only are real artifacts embedded in the recreated environment, but also the figures were created using life casts made from living Bushman, as they were called, or Khoisan, as they prefer to be known. The diorama has become an artifact in its own right, which makes the museum doubly responsible for it, that is, for making it in the first place and for taking responsibility for what it says about museum practice. Every attempt to deal with this problematic display and ones like it elsewhere in the gallery—whether to cover it up, explain and apologize for it, add warning labels—foregrounds the museum itself, its operations, history, and, in retrospect, its mistakes. Such reflexive moves make the museum, its practices and its mediations, visible. They effect a shift from an informing museology (the exhibit as a neutral vehicle for the transmission of information) to a performing museology (the museum itself is on display).¹¹ “The diorama is now closed,” the sign reads, but not gone. It is there, but it cannot be seen—except on postcards still for sale in the museum gift shop. With this performative gesture, the South African Museum publicly confronts the ideological burden of its own history. Tour guides have protested and threatened to not bring tourists to this museum until such time as the Bushman Diorama reopens.

Museum’s heritage

Post-World War II developments, really from the 1960s, arising from powerful social movements—the civil rights, free speech, anti-war, women’s, and student movements; the dissolution of colonial empires and new postcolonial nations; immigration from the postcolonial periphery to the imperial center; and developments in the 1990s (fall of the Berlin wall, collapse of the former USSR, end of Apartheid, emerging national consciousness of postcolonial settler societies such as Australia and New Zealand and creation of new national museums), the ever larger European Union (and the question of European identity under such new geopolitical and demographic conditions), rise of religious fundamentalisms (Christian, Jewish, and Islamic), and now the “war on terror.”

These developments have altered the nature of citizenship and given rise to policies of multiculturalism--and in New Zealand a policy of biculturalism, which recognizes the rights flowing from the treaty signed in 1840 (?) between the Crown and the people of the land, namely, the Maori. An example of how museums responded to the policy of biculturalism is the Goldie exhibition.¹² Goldie, New Zealand’s old master (or Norman Rockwell, depending on your perspective), was a very popular painter of Maori subjects during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. During the latter part of the twentieth century, pakeha (non-indigenous) New Zealanders became ashamed of Goldie and what they had come to see as his sentimental and stereotypical paintings of the Maori as noble savage on the brink of disappearance. He actually titled one of the paintings,

“The Last of a Dying Breed.” During the 1990s, curators discovered that Maori, particularly those who identified their ancestors in the paintings, did not view them as shameful, but rather as *taonga*, as sacred treasures--indeed, as their ancestors. The decision was taken to exhibit the Goldie paintings, but in a way that reflected the value they have for Maori today. The paintings were grouped by *iwi* or tribe. Antagonistic tribes were not hung near each other. The wall labels identified the sitter by name and tribe, not by the title that Goldie had given the painting, though the gallery guide did include Goldie’s title. The audio guide provided a detailed biography of the sitter, starting with his whakapapa, or genealogy, followed by his travels and achievements, including in some cases a trip to England, a meeting with the Queen, success in establishing a printing press, and the like. Maori related to the sitters were in the galleries to talk with visitors. Photographs of contemporary Maori life were exhibited outside the painting gallery when the exhibition traveled to the Museum of Sydney. Maori protocol was followed with respect to handling and treatment of the paintings.

A second example of how museums responded to the biculturalism policy was to take ethnology to task for the way that it had structured the old national museum, which consisted of a National Art Gallery featuring European-style paintings and sculpture and a natural history museum for plants, animals, Maori, and other peoples of the Pacific. This arrangement had become untenable not only on political but also on scientific grounds.

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, the early history of ethnology and of museums was defined by a close fit between the scientific project, the collection, and the museum. The scientific project was the museum’s *raison d’être*. The museum sponsored research expeditions, developed collections, and based research on them. Permanent exhibitions of permanent collections were first and foremost exhibitions of the discipline of ethnology itself. As I have discussed elsewhere, museums exhibited “ethnographic objects,” that were “objects of ethnography” in the sense that these objects were what they were by virtue of the conceptual categories and practices of ethnographers.¹³ What, however was to be done, when ethnology left the museum for the university? What was to be done with old collections, modes of displays, and the museums that continued to house them? Should these institutions be preserved as museums of themselves? As ethnology’s heritage? Or, should the museum reinvent itself? In the case of New Zealand, the decision was taken to dismantle the institution, reorganize the collections, and integrate the collections in exhibitions. First and foremost, however, it was necessary to redefine the mission of the national museum. The result is the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, known as Te Papa. This museum has repudiated its history as a museum. Instead, it has envisioned itself within the history of New Zealand’s participation in world’s fairs, from the very first one in 1851 until Seville. An expo style building and expository approach to exhibition make this museum immensely popular, consistent with its promise to attract people who never go to museums and to make a good faith effort to earn income to support at least part of the institution’s operating costs.

I have tried to argue here for a notion of heritage as a mode of cultural production that creates something new. Above all, heritage as a mode of cultural production produces a new relationship—a metacultural relationship—to that which becomes heritage. Moreover, heritage is one of the ways that museums, particularly ethnology museums, reinvent themselves and redefine their relationship to their stakeholders. Rather than museums continuing to be a showcase for ethnology, they are increasingly treating their collections as the heritage—someone’s heritage of the communities from which the

objects come or of the visitors to the museum. Consistent with this approach, Te Papa's motto is "Our home" and the museum markets itself as a place for "finding ourselves."¹⁴

I have also argued that repudiation has historically been an enabling condition for the production of ethnology, the collections it generates, and the museums that house them. A second round of repudiation puts ethnology and museums into a problematic relationship with their respective pasts and opens up new possibilities for them to engage with their own histories and their own heritage, as well as with their responsibility to those whose heritage they have helped to produce.

1 "U.S. Dept. of Reto Warns: 'We May Be Running out of Past'," *The Onion* 32, 14 (2000), <http://www.theonion.com/onion3214/usretro.html>.

2 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

3 See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

4 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

5 Intangible Heritage, UNESCO, http://mirror-us.unesco.org/culture/heritage/intangible/html_eng/index_en.shtml.

6 See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

7 Doron Swade, "Virtual Objects: Threat or Salvation? Museums of Modern Science," eds. Svante Lindqvist, Marika Hedin, and Ulf Larsson, Nobel Symposium, 112 (Canton, MA: Science History Publications/USA, 2000), 139-47.

8 Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth, and Affecting Presence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), and Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence: an Essay in Humanistic Anthropology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

9 Japan Atlas, Architecture, Jingu Shrine in Ise, <http://www.jinjapan.org/atlas/architecture/arc14.html>.

10 From the website of the Polynesian Cultural Center, <http://www.polynesia.com/aloha/history/>. See also, Andrew Ross, "Cultural Preservation in the Polynesia of the Latter Day Saints," in *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society* (London, New York: Verso, 1994), 21-98.

11 Johannes Fabian, *Power and Performance: Ethnographic Explorations Through Proverbial Wisdom and Theater in Shaba, Zaire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

12 Roger Blackyey, *Goldie* (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery and David Bateman, 1997).

13 See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 17-78.

14 Paul Williams, "Te Papa: New Zealand's Identity Complex," *New Zealand Journal of Art History* 24, 1 (2003): 11-24.