POSTERITY IS NOW

Practicing Museum Anthropology, Collections Care, and Collaborative Research with Indigenous Peoples

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Introduction

Greetings, reader! I want to make my intentions in writing this book clear: based on what I have learned from my experiences at the intersection of Native peoples, museums, and anthropology, I want to guide and support changing museum and research practices through sharing what I have learned from working with Indigenous communities. As a non-Native museum professional, I believe it's important to take on this work of sharing what we have learned so that Indigenous people don't have to keep explaining or requesting the same things over and over—it's on those of us in positions of power to change, and change the field, to create more welcoming and relevant spaces for Indigenous peoples to visit, work in, and lead.

This book is focused on providing insight and suggestions for practicing collaborative research and museum anthropology informed by Indigenous peoples with whom I have worked and with the purpose of following their lead and supporting their self-determination and cultural continuity.[1] The varied content of the book comes from my own personal journey in this field and a desire to reach multiple audiences, which can be a challenge. As I wrote this text, I at times was speaking to or engaging with students and museum

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practitioners, anthropologists and researchers more generally, and Indigenous community members who are in these fields or engaging with people in these fields. For the former, I hope this book can provide food for thought and ways to practice; for the latter, I hope it suggests what you can demand of the people and institutions you engage with.

The values and practices presented in this book can be implemented at every level and in every department of the museum—from hiring practices to research projects to language used in catalog nomenclature. The methods we have learned in museum anthropology provide good examples for social science research more generally. Here, I am focusing on areas that relate to anthropology and museum collections originating from Indigenous peoples because that is my area of knowledge and experience. But I hope that—no matter what kind of institution you are in or what role you serve within it, what kind of studies you are dedicated to in school, or what you intend to pursue when you graduate—you can find some inspiration here to think and act according to the values at the heart of collaboration: honesty, respect, reciprocity, and shared authority. Of course, to be able to work collaboratively and enact these values, first we must establish trust. In my line of work, that has been a long and difficult process—for very good reasons.

1

Posterity Is Now

My personal vision for museums is that those with anthropology collections reorient their mission to supporting cultural continuity and community well-being rather than to storing and preserving objects. I believe the care and preservation of collections will remain central to museums' mission. These orientations are not mutually exclusive, but prioritizing originating communities today fundamentally transforms our purpose and practice in exciting ways for everyone who engages with museums. This notion of collections access and engagement as contributing to community well-being comes from the language of Native community members themselves; it's how they often describe our work together when they visit their cultural items in museums.

Preserving Objects		*Supporting Cultural Continuity*
maintaining the integrity of the object	→	maintaining the integrity of cultural knowledge and practices, contributing to community health and well-being

The phrase "Posterity Is Now" is how I communicate this idea—it's a slogan, really![2] It was inspired by former Glenbow Museum director Robert Janes's turn of phrase when he explained that "the museum profession is fond of saying that 'museums keep things for posterity.' " Then, after returning ceremonial bundles back to the Blackfoot, he realized that "posterity had arrived" for the museum and for the Blackfoot community.[3] It's a powerful reorientation of what we take for granted: that posterity is this ever-receding horizon into the future and that it is the general public. But it doesn't have to be.

If we insist that posterity is now and that it includes Indigenous peoples, then museums have a role to play in the health and well-being of Indigenous communities. Posterity Is Now means that all those years of preserving objects can be viewed in part as aimed at Indigenous peoples today, as they engage with collection items to reawaken cultural knowledge and language or to feel connected to their people as they come into the presence of their ancestors or slide their hands into grooves worn by them. The museum enterprise, and its collections and their associated documentation, can support cultural continuity in many ways, including by inviting communities to engage with their ancestors' belongings, to interpret their experience in their own terms to the broader public, to get training to become cultural specialists and museum professionals, and to access, use, and sometimes return cultural items for contemporary ceremonial practices.

2
Teachings from Native Communities

I come to this reorientation for the purpose of museums by way of teachings from members of Native communities whose demands for supporting cultural continuity and Indigenous futures are righteous and strong. Responding to these demands contributes to what is often referred to as decolonizing the museum: the work of restorative justice and reciprocity with Indigenous

peoples whose items we care for in museum institutions. In my view, decolonizing is a striving for, an ongoing process that can never be complete; it requires unflinching reflexivity and continuing acts of good faith.[4]

The American Alliance of Museums has concluded that museums are the most trusted source of information in the United States.[5] This is a big responsibility: how do we manage that, what do we do with it? I ask those questions from the point of view of someone who has studied, worked at, and taught about the intersection of Indigenous peoples and museums since 1999. Over the years, I have gathered teachings that help guide my practice. They are all informed by a fundamental truth stated by W. Richard West Jr. (Southern Cheyenne), former director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, while I was a staff member there: we love museums because they have our stuff; we hate museums because they have our stuff. Therein lies both the acknowledgment of a traumatic and troubled past and hope for working together in a place that is valued, even if in different ways, by both museum professionals and Indigenous community members. (These are not mutually exclusive categories, I would add, thus feeding that hope.)

That hope exists in the face of a difficult history between museums and Indigenous peoples, about which I will not go into detail here. But it is something each of us should educate ourselves about—especially if we work in institutions with collections that originate from Indigenous peoples—because museums have played a part in their oppression, perceived vanishing, and objectification. Scientific racism, colonial and extractive collecting practices, the disinterment of Indigenous people's ancestors for scientific study, the treatment of Indigenous individuals as specimens, representations that are "frozen in time," and the mere fact that Indigenous peoples' material culture and bones are housed in *natural* history museums are the context in which we work and attempt to build relations of trust. As museums embrace the turn to restorative justice and community engagement, I believe they should be guided by the peoples whose items they house in their collections.

At the heart of these teachings from Native peoples is a call to reframe how museum staff think about Native peoples, collaboration, and repatriation—a call to reimagine the museum and its purpose. We want to embrace a different value system, one that welcomes multiple ways of knowing, reconsiders what counts as sources of expert knowledge, and engages with Indigenous individuals as experts and partners. These teachings from Native community members are relevant to all museums, regardless of whether they have Indigenous collections.

This reorientation has been going on in scholarship and in the everyday practice of collections visits and consultations with Native peoples in the US for some time. Native peoples, anthropologists, and museum professionals have all influenced a transformation in museology in the United States to embrace this perspective. Change has been driven by Native peoples' activism, critical scholarship, and interactions with cultural and museum anthropologists during fieldwork; anthropologists' critiques of colonialism and representation; the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA, 1990), which mandates consultation between museums and US Tribes; and our embodied practice of working with Native American items in our care, shaped through consultations and instructions in proper care from an Indigenous perspective. Accordingly, our ways of seeing and relating to the items in our care have changed and, consequently, so has our understanding about the potential, purpose, and practice of museums with anthropology collections.

When working in this fraught field, first impressions really matter. How you begin a relationship with a community matters. Repatriation is the return of Native ancestors or human remains, funerary items, and ceremonial items from museums to their originating communities. The teaching I refer to as "repatriation is a foundation for research" points to the fact that when you begin a relationship in a good way—in some cases, by engaging in consultation and restorative justice through repatriation—partnerships can form and may go in unanticipated directions. My relationship with the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation began when I invited them to come to the University of Colorado (CU) Museum of Natural History for a NAGPRA consultation. From the time we planned the consultation, our relationship evolved and we worked together on a number of projects—from a documentary to a collaborative film project to writing a book chapter together. Repatriation is a start, not an end, to productive relationships with communities.

When you collaborate, it also means you are not in control. That reality is captured for me in the phrase "failure is an option"—it has to be! That is what shared authority is all about: the community has the prerogative to end participation at any time. I am a big fan of space science history. For those who aren't, the usual phrase is "failure is *not* an option," which was popularized in the film *Apollo 13* and underlined the lethal consequences if the engineers' calculations about the endangered mission failed. But in collaborative work with communities, where the goal is to maintain an appropriate process or relationship, the opposite is true: failure *is* an option—this is a crucial component of the mission's success.

Finally, there is the notion that "Posterity Is Now," which I detailed above. It's my way of communicating that our efforts in museums should not only be about preserving and researching the collections we steward. Our efforts should prioritize actively supporting originating communities' cultural continuity, the maintenance of cultural practices, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. So, my approach to research and museum practice is grounded in restorative justice and reciprocity; it is committed to shared authority and seeks to contribute to community well-being. I invite you to reimagine the museum, alongside Native community members, as a place that addresses past injustices and endeavors to build new, more equal relations with Indigenous peoples.

3

Frameworks for Action and Accountability

There are frameworks for action and accountability that embrace the idea that Posterity Is Now and can guide our work in museums. We adhere to frameworks such as professional codes of ethics from organizations like the American Alliance of Museums and the Canadian Museums Association. But here I want to focus on Indigenous-centered frameworks to guide our practice in museums.

First and foremost, it's important to understand and acknowledge tribal sovereignty and self-determination. Native Americans in the US should not be conceived of as an ethnic group; their status is political and legal as citizens of Native Nations when they are enrolled tribal members. A phrase that represents this when referring to US tribal reservations is "the Constitution stops here." US federally recognized Tribes, and many other Indigenous nations depending on where they are in the world, have their own governments. In the US, depending on their size and legal and treaty rights, tribes may have their own constitutions, police forces, environmental protection agencies, tribal historic preservation offices, and supreme courts. It is important to also know that not all Tribes recognized as such are *federally* recognized; this means that federal American Indian law and its protections are not applied equally to all groups.

Museum professionals should be familiar with laws that affect our work and that we are accountable for in our institutions. A US example is NAGPRA, mentioned earlier. Internationally, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the UN in 2007, with 144 nations in favor and only 4 countries—all settler colonial nations—against: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Each of these countries later endorsed the declaration; Australia in 2009, the US and New Zealand in 2010, and Canada in 2016. Museums are uniquely positioned to enact a number of the rights outlined in the declaration, including ensuring that Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, protect, and develop their tangible and intangible culture; the right to access, use, and control their ceremonial objects and repatriate their ancestors; and the right to dignity and appropriate representation in education and public information. States are charged with combating discrimination against Indigenous peoples and promoting tolerance; given their history, museums share that responsibility.[6]

There are also guidelines for more ethical practice that have been developed by Indigenous communities that can direct our actions, like the First Nations Principles of OCAP.[7] OCAP stands for ownership, control, access, and possession; the site and its training teach people about data sovereignty and data governance. It is a framework for ensuring that data collection is done in an ethical way that is accountable to originating communities. Other examples of how we might create frameworks for accountability to originating communities in our policies and practice include the Guidelines for Collaboration from the School for Advanced Research (SAR), the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, the Indigenous Collections Care Guide, the Standards for Museums with Native American Collections (SMNAC), and the Smithsonian Institution's new policy regarding Shared Stewardship and Ethical Returns.[8]

4

A Culture of Learning

Engaging in the practices and perspectives proposed in this book works best when the whole museum or research institution, even those that do not work with collections or communities, are invested and committed to them.

In other words, leadership matters. Like community-based research, my approach to leadership begins with identifying core values. I mentioned these earlier, and they are likely familiar to anyone who works with Indigenous peoples: honesty, respect, reciprocity, and shared authority. It is the responsibility of institutional leaders to set the conditions for staff success, define aspirations through strategic planning, believe in the mission, and tell a compelling story so others believe in it too—to inspire people to engage with and support the institution. Throughout, leadership should consistently reflect on these questions: how can our practice reflect our values, and how can we communicate this to a broader public?

Values-Centered Leadership

The idea of Posterity Is Now, that the museum should reorient its mission to support cultural continuity and community well-being, is so much more achievable when that message is supported by museum leadership and even more so if it comes from the top. There are different leadership approaches, and some are more conducive than others to the values and principles Indigenous peoples want to see expressed by museums and universities. Leadership approaches like collective leadership and what Peter and Edgar Schein call "humble leadership" embody the values of collaboration and can set the conditions for staff to meaningfully engage in the practices recommended in this book.[9]

Collective leadership is a leadership philosophy that recognizes the value of diverse perspectives and contributions from team members and empowers them to work toward shared goals and to create change. This form of leadership can be practiced by managers of interns and volunteers, supervisors, unit heads, and directors. Anyone who supervises and leads a team can benefit from learning about this leadership approach. Staff can do wonderful work in their engagements with communities, but they can achieve so much more with the support of upper administration and a strong value-centered mission and philosophy from a museum's or institution's director.

Finding a leadership style that embodies your values is key. Practicing a leadership style that makes reorienting a museum toward supporting Indigenous communities' well-being more achievable is ideal—and it also increases the well-being of the individuals working in the museum.[10]

Embracing Diversity

The kinds of change proposed in this book insist on valuing diversity and may, for some museums and staff, feel risky or experimental. A commitment to diversity and inclusion is central to the values in this book, to the ethics of collaboration, and to great research and museum work. Innovation thrives with increased diversity and inclusion, creating opportunities to encounter and be inspired by new ideas and new ways of thinking. Diversity comes in many packages, including language, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, socioeconomic status, age, physical and mental ability, political affiliation, and more. In this book, I am highlighting the diverse perspectives of Indigenous peoples. It should be recognized that the diverse experience Native community members offer is not just in relation to Western knowledge and practices or different according to tribal affiliation. Tribal communities are diverse across all of these measures internally as well.

Hiring and contracting are key components of bringing diversity and Indigenous individuals into museum and university workplaces. This means reviewing what counts as qualified experience in job ads, reviewing the language we use in describing the work and who should apply, and having a recruitment strategy for bringing in a larger and more diverse applicant pool. You may need to go beyond a museum staff's existing networks. For example, attend conferences like that of the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums or post job listings on the Association on American Indian Affairs website or in Native networks on Facebook. The point is not what you specifically do but that you have a plan that is intentionally created to recruit and achieve a more diverse workforce.

Developing a Culture of Learning

To ensure not just innovation but also a vibrant work environment, it is important as a leader to cultivate a culture of learning. This requires setting clear expectations and maintaining effective communication with staff and the broader public. It should be generally understood that good ideas can come from any rank (interns and students included, interns and students especially!) and that staff are encouraged to take risks. It is okay to fail, as long as we learn from it. And, if we make a mistake, we should explain what happened and how we aim to address it. These commitments together—risk

taking, owning up to and learning from mistakes, and educating ourselves from diverse perspectives—are all a part of striving for excellence; the role of museum or institutional leadership is to ensure that staff have the preparation, feedback, and resources to achieve it.

Admitting mistakes is very important and connects to the core values at the heart of both this book and decolonizing practice. There will always be times when, despite our best efforts, we make a mistake. When we admit this publicly and how we intend to change or rectify the situation, we show that we are learning from our missteps, and we create a model for others to be more open and reflective. For example, during a meeting about redesigning museum exhibits for Mesa Verde National Park, I made the mistake of anticipating how another party would react to my suggestion by starting my remarks with "you may not like this but . . ." I know better. The right thing to do was state my concerns and then listen. This was not good communication or humble listening. It didn't represent the respect I have for our project partners, who did not actually have a problem with my suggestion. I apologized in writing and then forwarded that letter to my students so they could learn from the experience too: even their professor who has done this kind of work for years makes mistakes and sometimes in the moment forgets to practice what she preaches. So, as you read this book, please know that no one is perfect—especially not me!

It is important in this work to acknowledge and support the dignity and integrity of others. This requires effort, social awareness, and cultural sensitivity. We do our best in the moment, reflect on the experience if something goes wrong, and share how we will do better in the future. It is especially important to keep in mind that words are not enough: given the history of broken promises and extractive practices from these institutions, there is no benefit of the doubt if you are a university researcher or a museum institution working with Indigenous communities. Actions are what count: actions and follow-through.

5

Being a Model for Others

Part of embracing diversity and a culture of learning is to communicate your initiatives and discuss their successes and failures so others can learn from your experience. It is through partnering and knowledge sharing that we lift some of the burden on Native communities and tribal historic preservation officers (THPOs) of having to teach each individual museum staff member or researcher more appropriate ways of working.

In my own work and practice, I use three terms very deliberately: *consultation*, *collaboration*, and *partnership*. For me, consultation is when you ask for feedback on something already created, or it is a formal legal or political process (for example, a repatriation consultation or a national park reporting annually to tribes associated with that park). Collaboration implies reciprocity and an ongoing dialogue, shared authority and decision making in determining the goals, process, and outputs of a particular project. A partnership is the next level and goes beyond the life of a single project; there is a commitment to co-direction, co-management, and sharing of resources.[11]

I believe the way museum anthropologists engage with Indigenous communities can be a model for the broader fields of anthropology and museum studies and for research more generally. Museum anthropologists break the mold of the ivory tower curator who can't communicate with the public. We write for and with non-academics all the time and regularly produce anthropology for the public within the museum. Beyond the demands of originating communities, we work with exhibit developers and design specialists who are always saying "know your audience, no jargon!" And "I *know* you did two years of research, but still . . . give me 75 words." The emphasis is on "show, don't tell"—and we do that through thoughtful juxtaposition of images, text, and objects. It's those objects, those collections, that often bring us together—they are something Indigenous communities, museum anthropologists, and the public care about, even if for very different reasons and in very different ways.

Museum anthropologists are always in conversation with people beyond our field, whether originating communities, other museum and design professionals, or audience researchers. These consultations and collaborations

among museum staff, Indigenous community members, and design professionals bring different ways of knowing and seeing together, sparking new ideas that might not come from an intra-disciplinary conversation alone.

In these ways, museum anthropologists are dedicated to public anthropology, the practice of sharing our research and what we learn beyond the museum and the academy. For those of us who do collaborative anthropology with Native peoples, this is an inherent part of our work. Being at the nexus of colonial relations, power imbalances, and historical trauma; having to figure out how to build relations of trust from a distrusted and suspect position (all for good reasons); and communicating with communities and the broader public—these are all woven into our research practice. Our work is by nature a risk. We seek to establish trust, but failure is always possible.

Museum anthropology in North America has led us in collaborative, experimental directions. In our work together, our community partners drive us to develop new ideas, to think outside our academic box. And their demands that we create something that is relevant to their communities and that reaches beyond the academy drive us to diverse and creative ways of sharing our research.

This book is a response to these demands. It is arranged in four main parts, each contributing in different ways to making museums and research more welcoming to Indigenous peoples in general and to those who partner with us as well. I introduce each section by identifying the audiences I am primarily talking to and why. I offer case studies and teaching experiences that influenced my practice, as well as questions and a representative sample of readings to guide your practice.

Teaching examples present ideas for practice and lessons learned that have broader applications beyond students, teachers, and the classroom. Being a teacher is another way to be a model for others. Learning by doing is a common concept in Indigenous communities and something I value greatly as well. It's why the courses I taught at the University of Colorado Boulder included some form of practice or hands-on experience whenever possible. Teaching has been a form of learning by doing for me personally in figuring out how best to communicate what I was learning from Native community members, providing me with the opportunity for iteration, for revising and reframing over time, with a thoughtful and critical audience. Teaching was an important part of how I reflected on and processed what I was doing in communities and in the museum, and it was what led me to conceive of and organize the ideas and structure of this book.

6

A Companion to Practice

This book is intended to be a companion to practice. This means two things: first, it is practical and aims to guide action, to influence how we do things (not just how we think about them); second, it is not meant to be a text that stands alone on how to do museum anthropology, collections stewardship, or research methods. It is meant to introduce ideas, questions, and suggestions as a companion to your work or to existing texts in these areas.

Part 1, Collaboration Is Theory in Motion, introduces the Indigenous and anthropological theories that are foundational to creating a welcoming space for Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing and engaging with museums and collections. They include decolonizing methodologies and Indigenizing the museum, the relationship between language and power, multiple ways of knowing, and relationality. These theories help us better understand, and better accommodate the needs of, originating community members who may refer to collection items as kin or living beings, for example. Predominant theories change over time. This is as much a product of our current moment as it is an invitation to, at any time, consider the thoughts and beliefs and theories that underpin your practice and where they originate.

Part 2, Museum Anthropology, addresses areas of museum research and museum professional responsibility, including collections and community-based research, curation, interpretation, exhibition, repatriation law, and publication. Issues of language, authority, consent, and ownership are highlighted. This is about what curators and anthropologists do in the museum. Part 3 focuses specifically on engagement with collection items. For instance, part 2 may address the legal framework of repatriation, while part 3 discusses the experience of repatriation consultations in the museum.

Part 3, Collections Access and Care, addresses Native ways of relating to cultural items and prioritizing the maintenance of cultural knowledge rather than objects. This section suggests ways we can work to change museums from being hostile to more welcoming places for Indigenous peoples through the ways we steward and engage with their belongings. Cultural care, housing and conservation, repatriation consultation, digital assets and

their management and dissemination, and collections records and policy are addressed in this section.

Part 4, Collaborative Research, shows how we can work toward ethical and responsive research practice and work beyond museum walls. This section also delves deeper into the practicalities of collaborative research design and practice. Models for community-based research are presented in detail, including how to communicate research publicly, how to design a budget for community work, and how to teach and mentor the next generation in these approaches.

The conclusion, "Reimagining Anthropology and the Museum," briefly recaps the vision of this reorientation in museums and summarizes some practical steps to getting there. The appendixes include exercises relating to specific book sections and a resource list of examples of museum policy documents and collaboration guidelines.

This book ranges from theory to practice and includes ideas of objects as kin as well as worksheets for how to design and budget collaborative projects. That is a result of my own personal journey and the nature of collaborative work. It can lead us in unanticipated directions and push us to adapt and acquire new skills if we let it, if we are open to shared authority and emergent outcomes. I hope this book provides some insight and examples to think with as you seek to participate in or change museum and research practice. Our knowledge and ways of doing things are always evolving over time, even more so when we work with communities. Thank you for joining me at this moment in what continues to be a work in progress!

INTRODUCTION NOTES

1. An early and influential book for many of us who do collaborative museology is the edited volume *Museums and Communities*, published in 2003. In her chapter, Trudy Nicks states in the section "Changing Perspectives on Objects and Museums," "As museums work with source communities, the focus on object preservation—as central purpose and guideline for practice—is being challenged by those who feel that the primary purpose of a museum should be presentation of indigenous cultures." She goes on to note the Aboriginal Australian idea of "keeping place," where the goal is to house items intended for use rather than for long-term preservation. Nicks, "Museums and Contact Work," 21.

2. Shannon, "Posterity Is Now," 5–13.

3. Janes, "The Blackfoot Repatriation," 255.

4. This section includes excerpts from Shannon, "Museum Mantras," 28–36. Republished with permission.

5. American Alliance of Museums, "Museum Facts and Data."

6. United Nations, "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples."

7. The First Nations Information Governance Centre, "The First Nations Principles of OCAP®."

8. School for Advanced Research, "Guidelines for Collaboration"; First Archivists Circle, "Protocols for Native American Archival Materials"; School for Advanced Research, "Indigenous Collections Care Guide"; Smithsonian Institution, "Shared Stewardship and Ethical Returns"; School for Advanced Research, "Standards for Museums with Native American Collections."

9. Schein and Schein, *Humble Leadership*.

10. Jacobs et al., "The Influence of Transformational Leadership on Employee Well-Being."

11. For examples of defining different levels of engagement, see Bernstein and Ortman, "From Collaboration to Partnership at Pojoaque, New Mexico"; Colwell, "Collaborative Archaeologies and Descendant Communities."