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Decolonising the Museum-Assessment 3-Artefact decolonised:

The ‘Grindle Pot’ and Decolonising the Museum

Figure 1, Grindle Pot, Cameron ransley, 2020

Decolonising the museum involves finding a balance between representing both indigenous and non-indigenous viewpoints. Museums and artefacts can be decolonised by using new approaches and practices to displaying artefacts that removes western bias inside the museum industry. Throughout history, museums have predominantly been centred around western ideals and practices to exhibiting objects. These methods used by institutions, indoctrinates cultural ideals of indigenous collections to western practices of displaying objects. This essay will explain how an object can be decolonised, by museums adopting new practices to displaying and archiving exhibitions. Using examples of a decolonised object, this essay will explain how new museum practices can be adopted to represent the views of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples. The object that this essay will be decolonising is a ‘Grindle pot’ (as seen in figure 1) ‘Grindle' means knee in the local language, as it is unknown what nation the object came from originally. This clay pot is known to be from Aboriginal people of the North Coast of New South Whales. A ‘Grindle Pot’ is a type of clay pot that is shaped around the artists knee. The pot would have most likely been used for storing goods and used in food consumption.

To decolonise any artefact, it is to see the artefact as different to others that are associated with western cultures. To decolonise an object, institutions must adopt new practices and process's that removes western bias that is associated with a majority of museums. One way to do this, is to employ Indigenous curators and professionals to design exhibits and displays from an indigenous perspective. There are challenges that are associated with being an indigenous curator. Challenges such as indigenous curators becoming entrenched in western ideals and museum practices, being largely underrepresented when it comes to the material culture held by a museum, and the balance between representing displays from an Indigenous perspective whilst removing a colonialist mindset. Indigenous professionals in museums such as Áile Aikio and Djon Mundine face these challenges when design decolonised museum exhibits. Áile Aikio is an Indigenous Sámi women from northern Norway and Djon Mundine is an Indigenous Australian from the Bandjalung people of northern New South Wales.

Through out history museums have been dominated by practices that largely alienate Indigenous cultures. "Many museums have legacies rooted in colonialism; their collections were from wealthy donors who benefited from empires"(Shoenberger, 2020). Indigenous museum professionals are attempting to alter this opinion by using new techniques and processes that encourage Indigenous engagement and promote Indigenous perspectives. Áile Aikio has been a curator at the Sámi Museum Siida in Anár in Finland since 2005. Miss Aikio has written an article based on her experiences of being an Indigenous museum professional. The article is titled 'Balancing Between Two Contested Worlds: The Challenges and Benefits of Being an Indigenous Museum Professional' from which the author describes her experiences of being an Indigenous museums professional. The article has suggested that western bias "was inherited from the colonial museum structure and remains the main challenge in building truly equal relationships, collaborations, and sustainable futures between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. The policies and practices of museums are largely based on non-Indigenous values and there is only limited accommodation for Indigenous heritage values and the needs of the indigenous community" (Aikio, 2018). Aikio has suggested that when building an exhibit, institutions should start by building a structure based on the conventions and values of indigenous people who are at the centre of the exhibit. This method begins to shift the emphasis of Eurocentric ideals that museums have adopted for centuries, to a

new focus that encourages the engagement of Indigenous communities at the source. By working with communities from the beginning, encouraging Indigenous involvement can be a “prerequisite to decolonisation” (Aikio, 2018). This thinking has been reflected in collections that renowned curator Djon Mundine has reflected in his work.

Djon Mundine is a member of the Bandjalung nation around the Clarence River area of northern New South Whales. Mundine is a well known Indigenous curator, artist, writer and activist who is known as curating the permanent Aboriginal Memorial installation held at the National Gallery of Australia. Mundine has included many new ideas and approaches into his works for years, adopting the idea that indigenous people’s should control their heritage into the future. As an Indigenous curator, Mundine has adopted practices such as those suggested by Áile Aikio in exhibitions he has worked on. His most famous exhibition is the 1988 Aboriginal Memorial at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. “The Aboriginal Memorial is an installation of 200 hollow log coffins from Central Arnhem Land. It commemorates all the indigenous people who, since 1788, have lost their lives defending their land” (NGA, 2020). This exhibition emphasised the need for collaboration with Indigenous peoples to lead the curatorial process and to design an exhibition based around indigenous people’s perspectives. The exhibition sought to decolonise the objects used in the display by having indigenous artists collect, design and install each individual piece. All 200 hollowed log coffins where hollowed out by termites, cut down and painted in different clans totemic designs as would have been done by Aboriginal people during burial ceremonies. The ritual ceremony in which the logs are used, “The bones of the deceased are painted with red ochre and, during special dances, placed inside the log” (NGA, 2020). The logs used in the Memorial installation where collected by indigenous people, as can be seen in figure 2. Djon Mundine as an Indigenous curator sought to remove western bias that surrounds museums, in the Aboriginal Memorial project. This was done in the display with the “development of the memorial from a series of projects, which would Involve all sections of the local art community, to the genesis of an idea for a memorial, and the process of its realisation in the form it takes today” (Mundine, 2013). Mundine was successful in decolonising the Aboriginal Memorial exhibition by altering practices and resources the National Gallery of Australia would normally use and replaced them with Indigenous professionals and artists.

Figure 2, collecting a hollow log for Memorial Project, David Daymirringu 1987

To decolonise museum exhibitions and displays, working with indigenous professionals and communities is a good start. However repatriation of institutionalised collections is another step that can be taken to decolonise the museum and remove western bias. Returning objects to their original owners and lands is a guaranteed way to decolonise the museum.this is done by removing objects that profiteered of colonialist mindsets and returning them to their original owners. “In practical terms the emphasis on preservation of the context and associated activities, not just the object itself, involves the resocialisation of objects” (Simpson, 2009). This means to take indigenous collections out of the museum context and return them to their cultural context. Institutions such as Londons Natural History Museum and AIATSIS have repatriated and work to repatriate indigenous collections back to their original owners. There are challenges that are associated with this, institutions can be reluctant to hand over collections as collections are what make museums and collections can often be tied up in bureaucratic process that can take years to resolve. This at times can only make it harder to decolonise the museum. Another challenge that the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies has found that when collections are repatriated, some indigenous people are less inclined to accept objects back. As objects retain a spiritual and sentimental value to the indigenous peoples, painful memories are exposed from when the object was taken during the colonial era.

For more than a century, the London Natural History Museum has held the ancestral remains of more than 1400 Indigenous Australians who were taken from Australia during the colonial era. The remains were taken to London to be studied by Anthropologists to determine wether indigenous Australians are different to Europeans. As the remains were considered ‘Specimens’ in the

Museums, the remains were dehumanised by a society that believed that Aboriginal culture was invalid. This has formed an idea that Indigenous cultures that are put on display in museums, rely of the validation of western ideals which is simply not true. This idea however is changing due to the repatriation and return of collections to their rightful owners. Doug Milera, an elder from the South Australian Narungga community has stated that due to the remains being returned to Australia, the 'Healing process can begin'. "The fact that our old people were taken without permission and that information has been passed down through the generations, and knowing that they've been sent to other countries for research, it [the anger] still runs very deep in our community" (London's Natural History Museum returns Aboriginal remains to elders - ABC News, 2019). The return of indigenous remains to Australia is a step to decolonise museums by returning objects that do not belong to museums. However these remains where held up in bureaucratic process's that prevented the remains being returned immediately to the Narungga community to bury them. The repatriation of the remains where part of an Australian Government project called 'Indigenous repatriation'. The Indigenous Repatriation project "is a collaborative process. We encourage a holistic approach to repatriation where overseas governments, institutions and private holders work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to return ancestral remains" (International repatriation | Department of Communications and the Arts, 2020). Under this project 1618 remains have been repatriated as of May 2020.

During the repatriation process their can often be conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous policies and ideas on how the items can be handled once they are repatriated.
Conflict arises when there is miscommunication between stakeholders during the repatriation process. Examples of issues that arise during this process is around the rights of indigenous Australians and copy right laws which may alter the repatriation of objects. Majority of Museums in Australia recognise that "other cultures have a right to be identified as moral, if not yet legal, owners of items of their culture" (Pickering and Gordon, 2011). Michael Pickering and Phil Gordon of the National Museum of Australia explain that western heritage ideals dictate that a "person might have legitimate authority and a commensurate claim to remains or objects under a western legally defined heritage authority code" before the repatriation process can begin. This can cause conflict with Indigenous customs as the objects were most likely acquired without the consent of the original custodians. "However, it must be recognised that some objects, both secret/sacred objects and human remains, were acquired legitimately in accordance with the cultural protocols of both giver and receiver, particularly those acquired over the past 60 years" (Pickering and Gordon,

2011). This is where it can become difficult when repatriating items as their can be differing views of terms of ownership regarding items. In Western cultures, intellectual cultural property laws are only starting to take shape however, collections can still be judged using current copyright laws if a binding contract exist's for the collection. In the future of repatriating collections there is a need for proper communication and recognition of indigenous Australians rights to further decolonise the museum.

Decolonised Object:

The Grindle pot, in which this essay references I owned by the University of Canberras Cultural Heritage Collection. Although this collection is not open to the public for viewing, it can be used by students for research and academic purposes. This collection is run by an institution that is yet to 'decolonise the museum'. This section of this essay will provide ideas that the University of Canberra's Cultural Heritage Collection can use to display its objects in a 'decolonised' way.

One recommended way to have an object decolonised involves having the object in control of the original owners of the item. This can involve the repatriation of the object to the original owners. In the example of the Grindle Pot, that would involve research into where exactly the item came from, locating the artists community and facilitating contact between those indigenous peoples and the University of Canberra. Having stakeholder interaction, decisions can then be used for future display of the object in a museum. An idea that drives UC's Cultural heritage Collection is the idea of 'bringing communities together' and the stories that can be told through objects. Ideas such as a set term limit on display of the object can bet discussed by stakeholders during initial consultation and design of an exhibit. This means so that the object can retain its connection with its traditional owners whilst being open to be used for exhibition's into the future. This encourages growth between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. As there is not much information regarding the origins of the Grindle pot, this research can gather information for the indigenous curator to then be used when displaying this. During this process, traditional practices and customs of story telling can be adopted by the curator to replace western ideals regarding the display of objects. An example of this would be in a western museum concept an object is usually put on display accompanied by a short caption of what the object would have been used for. An Indigenous curator could instead use the object in a simulated display that shows how and what the object would have been used for by Indigenous Australians. Decolonising the Grindle Pot and the wider collection held by the University of Canberra is a start to decolonising museums as a whole. As a sector leader in the

education of young Museum Professionals, the University of Canberra has the opportunity to shape the next generation of Museum professionals. The university is guiding students to be more inclusive and understanding that the museum must be decolonised.

In conclusion decolonising the museum sector involves representing the viewpoints of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous cultures. Ways to decolonise established museums is to remove/change western practices and process's, encourage the employment of indigenous professionals for indigenous exhibition's, the repatriation and control of collections to Indigenous communities and to remove the idea completely that Indigenous culture needs western ideal to validate it's worth. These steps are just the beginning to decolonilising the museum and removing western bias in the heritage industry.

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