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A postcolonial moment in analytic engagement with museum ethnographic collections?

• A postcolonial moment emerges as happenings of political, cultural and epistemic work in institutional and organisational settings—it is passage, trajectory, going-on inflected in particular ways.

• Postcolonialism is not a stoppage or reversal of colonialism, rather a re-gathering and diverting. It is using resources at hand, albeit in some way an outcome of the colonial.

• Such a trajectory is beset by tension: a seeming imminent failure and dashing of hopes, set against the hopeful expectation of achievement of future different than pasts.

• Postcolonial moments emerge in particular situated episodes of institutional practices.

Starting with collections of ethnographic items in museums there are many ways in which postcolonial moments might be set running in seeking to catalyse the emergence of futures different than pasts. One obvious way to initiate such a moment is for either the ethnographic items or the descendants of their makers to travel, so that various forms of reuniting objects with the people-places from whence they originate might be contrived.[1] Such undertakings have been underway for quite some time by now, catalysing various further engagements. Quite properly these responses to museum ethnographic collections evidencing a past colonial extractivism, focus up political and moral aspects of the need to acknowledge at the very least, the actuality that some valued expressions of the collective life another

people and their places are kept for 'display' in this place, far removed from, and beyond the governance of those peoples whose collective lives they express.

I want to open up a different approach in asking 'How and where might a sustainable postcolonial moment emerge in *analytic* engagement with museum ethnographic collections?' I am concerned with an epistemic problem: How to *begin* engagement in a way that avoids prejudicing outcomes in favour of the former coloniser despite good intentions? How to have enough confidence that the inevitable partialities of our epistemic practices will not condemn any and all initiatives to merely re-enact past injustices? How to refrain from epistemic violence? Articulating a response to these questions is in some sense prior to beginning engagement.

In this post, I am making a claim about ontological aspects of epistemic practices. First, I tell a story of Australia's 'Official Papua Collection'. I propose that as this collection was amassed between 1907 and 1933 and stored in 'a depot' in Port Moresby, the expanding set of ethnographic items was an indexical colonial archive situated within Australian colonial institutional practices. The items in the archive referenced particular Papuan people-places in serving colonial ends, although in actuality it was only rarely called into service. In addition to its rarely used capacity as index that might actually inform good governance, the collection displayed the coloniser, both to itself and to those ruled. Semiotically speaking the items and the collection as a whole were also iconic. In the 1980s in articulating such a collection as a postcolonial phenomenon, Nicholas Thomas asserted no doubt correctly, that collecting in Pacific colonies by governments and missionaries was as much a demonstration of power, designed to show progress under colonial rule, as it was a contribution to science, or indeed to ensuring possibilities for good governance.[2] The ability to collect and display objects promoted the idea that pacification and control of a new territory was wholly successful.

When the collection was transferred from Port Moresby to Canberra to be stored as

part of the collection of the Australian Institute of Anatomy in Canberra and available to be visited by 'scientists', its referencing, indexical capacities began to fade, its claims to do more than display power began to ring hollow. Later still, when shifted to another Canberra building and stored as part of the Australian Museum, it formally became a postcolonial collection. As an official postcolonial collection, it has been visited by at least one Australian graduate student [3], its role now seems to be one of lurking and haunting from a dark corner in the national capital.

The collection's purported function as indexical referencing material has become officially null and void. It no longer has any place in governance; and in its role as display of colonial power it begins to look ridiculous. So, what has it become? What might it become?

My claim is that with the right analytic approach the collection can be become imbued with a second order of iconicity. The approach begins in recognising that in no longer attesting the brilliance of colonial rule, the collection might be mined to resource the contriving of displays of still emergent orders of postcoloniality. But how to know the collection in ways that precipitate such displays?

I am proposing that considerable conceptual improvisation is required if the 'Official Papua Collection' is to shift from being a colonial left-over to becoming resource as postcolonial ethnographic collection. Becoming familiar with the 'how' of conceptual improvisation is crucial in promoting museum ethnographic collections as agential expressions of the postcolonial in metropolitan centres in the twenty first century.

Introducing an Australian Museum Ethnographic Collection

The 'Official Papuan Collection' is maintained as a discrete ethnographic collection within the holdings of the National Museum of Australia. It sits as an anomaly among the collections of the Museum differing from other contemporaneous collections of New Guinean material culture in that Museum, and from collections held in other

museums.

Amassed across a period of 26 years from about 1907 to 1933 on the instructions of Hubert Murray, the first and longest serving Governor of the Australian Territory of Papua, the intention was that the collection should stay in Papua rather than be translocated to a metropolitan centre. The collecting work was done by Australian colonial officials as they went about their business of governing the particular people-places under their jurisdiction, with items collected from villages spread across the territory under Australian control.

The collection comprises over 3000 objects. Some, such as a Purari Delta *kaiaimunu* or wickerwork figure associated with initiation ceremonies, collected in 1908 by Hubert Murray, are unique examples of the earliest material removed (stolen?) from newly contacted cultural areas of Papua. Others, such as trophy human heads, are rare because government regulations were set up to discourage cannibalism and headhunting practices. The majority of the objects in the collection are not rare: they were objects collected with relative ease through barter by patrol officers, resident magistrates and others governing in the field. One unique aspect of the collection is its elaborated stories of particular government officials and their work, the circumstances of the collection, and of the original 'life' of the objects that were collected.

In 1905 the Papua Act was proclaimed by the parliament of the newly federated colonies of Australia "to provide for the acceptance of British New Guinea as a Territory under the authority of the Commonwealth, and for the Government thereof." Thus, the responsibility and cost of governing the Territory of Papua, the colony previously called British New Guinea was 'gifted' to Australia. Shortly afterwards, Hubert Murray was

inducted as the Territory's first Australian Governor. Hubert Murray was a first generation Anglo-Irish Australian, educated in Sydney's Catholic schools. In 1906, at

the very beginning of his involvement with Papua as a relatively junior judge, he declared that "In Papua there is the opportunity to prove that it is possible to rule a native race without destroying it and that it is left to Australia to make of this splendid dream a glorious reality … to serve the dictates of humanity and [Australia's] own best material interests."[4]

On being appointed, Murray was determined that freed of the British Colonial Office, his office would express "Australian ideals" in its administration of justice and Australian ideals of colonial justice and administration would be informed by the science of anthropology.[5] As part of Murray's administration, patrols were to be conducted according to a clearly articulated plan of colonial rule. Each village and district were to be visited at least once in three months. Rules governing hygiene and orderly behaviour were to be drawn up for each district and explained to inhabitants. In addition, patrols were to collect items that would provide material evidence of the life of the people. This 'evidence' duly became "The Official Papua Collection." In 1907, Murray formally announced his plan to use the outcomes of anthropological research as a tool for administration. In a letter to the Australian Minister for Home and Territories he sought permission to turn the collection into an 'official' one, and to establish an ethnological museum in Port Moresby. Murray gained permission for both requests, and plans were drawn up for a museum.

In retrospect of course, many of Murray's policies can be considered conservative and paternalistic, but they were considered enlightened at the time. For Murray, the objects, in evidencing the life of Papuan people-places was a way to a greater knowledge of them. Murray's diary and letters to family members contain anecdotes and observations on the activities of people in various villages, the methods used in the construction of their buildings, and instances where he acquired objects through trade and as gifts. Later, as he became familiar with the anthropological literature, and met many of the anthropologists who came to Papua to conduct their research, he began to incorporate some of his anthropological observations into his

publications.

Murray insisted on resort to legal means of coercion, and endeavoured to integrate the 'science' of anthropology into administrative policies. The collection was not simply an extension of an intellectual hobby. It was to be specifically ethnological and to contribute to the overall knowledge base of the administration. It would benefit European and Papuan alike and form an integral part of Murray's plan for a 'dual mandate'.

Never exhibited; unseen apart from brief visits made by some officials and visiting scientists, the objects were stored in the what was effectively a depot in Port Moresby. As Murray's term of governorship drew to a close he began to worry about the future of the collection. Murray contacted Prof Colin MacKenzie, the director of an equally idiosyncratic institution of colonial rule, the Australian Institute of Anatomy. MacKenzie's primary focus in the Australian Institute of Anatomy was the curation and exhibition of human remains. For him ethnographic material 'qualified' these human remains exhibits in evidencing 'evolutionary sequences'.[6] These two rather similar characters agreed to combine 'their' collections and the Official Papua Collection became an integral part of the Australian Institute of Anatomy.

On being transferred to Canberra, the collection was displayed and available to "scientists". No further additions were made after its move to Canberra in 1933, although the orders given to the field officers of the Papuan Administration probably remained in place. The first public exhibition of items from the collection was in the 1938 Sydney Exhibition in honour of the 150th Anniversary of New South Wales; a few further exhibitions followed. The contents of the Australian Institute of Anatomy were subsumed by the National Museum of Australia when it was established by an Act of Parliament in 1980. The collections have been in storage since they were moved from the building of the Institute of Anatomy.

Conceptualising (and Reconceptualising) Museum Ethnographic Collections

Most museum visitors take museums' collections of items for granted. While it may be of interest to know where items came from and what their life was 'back there-then', and perhaps also how they got into the collection and what their career as items in a collection has been since, the idea that the collections as wholes, and the items as parts, have been conceptualized and reconceptualized along the way is not obvious to many. In presenting my account of Australia's 'Official Papua Collection' I have emphasized the conceptualizing of the administrator who instructed his underlings to collect. His concept of an ethnographic collection differed from the conceptualizing of anthropologists, who in turn differed amongst themselves about the concept of a collection. Both administrative and anthropological conceptualization of an ethnographic collection were different to the concept that motivated Christian missionaries to amass collections.

It is this conceptualizing work that interests me, and in attending to it I mobilize an analytic framing first developed by the American philosopher CS Peirce, and the rather haphazard account of what concepts are as developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*. In particular it is the ways Fred Moten, American analyst of the radical innovations in artistic form by African-American artists with during the 1960s and 1970s, uses the writings of Peirce and Wittgenstein that informs my analysis here.

For Peirce, distinctions between what he saw as different types of signs in making meanings was central in logic, like Moten I have in the past mobilized Peirce's typology as a way to read Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Familiarity with the semiotic typology allows us to see its author as finding tricky ways to exemplify shifts between the modalities that Peirce codifies. Reading carefully, we can become familiar with and distinguish the different ways concepts work. Peirce's typology differentiates between signs (words, numbers, representational objects and so on) that work as indexes, those that enact as symbols, and those that perform as icons. The first sort, the indices, embed some sort of causal connection in materialising

semiotically. Lightening and thunder are two such natural phenomena; words and numbers that refer to empirical data, and images that are portraits of particular material entities, a particular person perhaps, are indexical. Symbols are socially 'legislated' in their bindings to effect matter as meaningful; terms by which a theory is articulated are symbolic. Icons differ from indexes and symbols in that there is no distance between sign and thing. The thing *is* the sign and the sign *is* the thing. Icons re-present or re-perform rather than represent something 'out-there' somehow outside the domain of meaning making. Iconicity offers possibilities for nuanced, fluid and open-ended meaning making in allowing possibilities for multiple orders of meaning making to be deployed simultaneously.

In his *In the Break: The Radical Aesthetics of the Black Tradition*, Moten re-presents the poetry and jazz music of artists like Amiri Baraka and Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, and Charles Mingus, emphasising their radical experimentation with the structures and conventions of aurality, visuality, literature, and performance still then dominant in European art and aesthetics. What is important for Moten is to unravel absences and presences of these performances, as a politics of Black performance practices. What I want to draw from Moten is his concern to find a vocabulary to elaborate the improvisatory work of these artists as processes of resignification shifting between multiple meaning making orders. I see such resignifications as forms of improvisatory reconceptualization of the temporal. In interfering with familiar ways of intersectioning temporalities the Radical Black American artists of the mid twentieth century enacted, performed, and inhabited an active form of re-historicising.

The artistic work of these brilliant performers is a form of re-historicising; a shifting between what the French historian of history François Hartog calls 'regimes of historicity' in his book of that name. It is reconceptualization effected in bouncing from one set of metaphysical commitments to another. Moten's book, brilliant in its turn, offers a close reading of selected works using an analytic framing that

mobilising a Wittgensteinian story about what concepts are, expands Peirce's account of orders of iconicity (Moten, 2003, 91-93). What Moten points to and what in particular I want to pick up is that spaces *between* distinct temporal orders of meaning are conjured into existence in the performance, the display, raising possibilities of second order iconicity, and possibilities for raising temporal experience to a new order of magnitude. If we imagine time as vague though tangible substance of interaction, this evoked further order of the material semiotic amounts to re-ontologising through and in performance.

So how does all this arcane talk of the material semiotic relate to the seemingly banal shifts of museum collections between colonial and postcolonial orders of meaning? It suggests that in displaying a museum ethnographic collection to enact a postcolonial moment, curators need curatorial practices that achieve a collective performance analogous to a John Coltrane or Billie Holiday performance! That is a high bar to clear.

Curating a Postcolonial Moment?

I have suggested that ethnographic collections emerging in colonial situations begin as assemblages of items indexed to people-places in one way or another, indeed considerable work was put in to try to ensure the possibility of indexing, although often collectors failed to do the work. When assembled the collections not only purported to index, but displayed the political heft of colonising both in the home places of those who colonised—the metropolitan centres, and conveyed that to those whose lives and places were colonised. Becoming as *post*colonial ethnographic collections as responsibilities and costs of rule were passed from the hands of metropolitan elites to local interests as nation states asserted independence, the roles of ethnographic collections diminished, seeming to leave them stranded, reduced to lurking and haunting, as hidden memorials to past glories/failures.

The question for curators who hope for something beyond such a role becomes this.

How to re-conceive to render museum ethnographic collections as agential in the postcolonial? And prior to that, how to know an ethnographic collection partially, and know that and how we partially know that collection? A general answer has been articulated for some time now.[7] Start from both ends so to speak, with the epistemic and cultural resources of the former coloniser and equally, with the epistemic and cultural resources of the former colonised. Accept in beginning that epistemic practices of these ends are unknowably different; begin in difference and acceptance of epistemic partiality. Through engagement devise enough robust connections in learning how to go on together in doing difference. The aim of such engagement is re-historicising, and in beginning, this is cultivating an epistemic demeanour of mutual, generous compromise effected through cultivating a generative, canny epistemic dissensus.

But what is re-historicising, how is it done, and how do we know when we have done it? Those are equally questions for curators coming from both ends so to say. Re-historicising is engaging forms of re-conceptualising in mobilising, among other resources various regimes of temporalizing. Here we are in the effortlessly multiplous and confusing realms of iconicity, the comforts of indexicalising and symbolising largely denied us. In knowing icons any and all epistemic certainties are ephemeral, hard-won and partial. Nevertheless, the hope that has animated this text is this: knowing that others before us have struggled and achieved and have found ways to articulate both the struggles and achievements might inspire.

Meanwhile the “Official Papua Collection” lurks and haunts, waiting its moment to speak to those (many) Australian politicians who would misuse the goodwill of our near neighbours whose futures, present and pasts are so deeply entangled with their own.

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[1] Viola König (2007). "Zeitgeist and Early Ethnographic Collecting in Berlin: Implications and Perspectives for the Future," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 52, Museums: Crossing Boundaries, pp. 51-58.

[2] N Thomas, (1989). "Material culture and colonial power: Ethnological collecting and the establishment of colonial rule in Fiji', *Man*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 41-56. N Thomas (1994). "From present to past: The politics of colonial studies", in *Colonialisms Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1994, pp. 11-33.

[3] See Sylvia Schaffarczyk (2006). "Australia's Official Papuan Collection: Sir Hubert Murray and the How and Why of a Colonial Collection" *reCollections. Journal of the National Museum of Australia.* Volume 1, Issue 1 http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol 1 no 1.

My text draws extensively on this work.

[4] Lewis Lett (1949). *Sir Hubert Murray of Papua*. Sydney: Collins. page 95.

[5] Lett (1949); 66.

[6] D. Kaus, "Pacific collections in the National Museum of Australia, Canberra", unpublished and undated ms. B. Craig, "The Melanesian collections of the National Museum of Australia", Conference of Museum Anthropologists, 25 September 1993, pp. 16-27 (p. 16), quoted in Schaffarczyk (2006).

[7] Philipp Schorch, Conal McCarthy and Eveline Dürr (2018). "Introduction: conceptualizing Curatopia" in *Curatopia. Museums and the Future of Curatorship*. Manchester University Press. Manchester.