

School of Advanced Study, University of London
Institute of Historical Research

Chapter Title: Calibrating relevance at the Pitt Rivers Museum

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Book Title: Dethroning historical reputations: universities, museums and the commemoration of benefactors

Book Editor(s): Jill Pellew, Lawrence Goldman

Published by: School of Advanced Study, University of London, Institute of Historical Research. (2018)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv512v68.12>

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7. Calibrating relevance at the Pitt Rivers Museum

Laura N. K. Van Broekhoven

Public institutions such as schools, hospitals, universities and museums hope that they can be of direct personal relevance to stakeholders and wider constituencies. The concept of relevance is studied in many fields including cognitive sciences, logic and epistemology. In institutional terms, it involves being meaningful to society at large, and in practical terms, for a museum at least, it will involve satisfying the needs of broader audiences. Given that relevance is, in its nature, temporary, and is spatially, institutionally and individually bound, institutions need to constantly adjust themselves to remain relevant. Relevance is ascribed and needs to be intentionally cultivated. It is not something, therefore, that an institution can assign to itself nor is it static: institutions need to constantly adjust themselves to remain relevant. How does a museum ensure that users find inspiration, enchantment and knowledge that are of direct personal relevance?

Relevance

In a recent book on *The Art of Relevance*, Nina Simon debunks two of the commonly held myths around relevance and museums.¹ First, the idea of universal relevance: the belief among museum professionals that what we do is relevant to everyone, always. Compare this with the concept of relative relevance which suggests that information is relevant to people at certain times and will depend on their own interests and/or life experiences. Second, that ‘relevance is irrelevant’: an often firm belief that visitors will be so mesmerized by the awesomeness and distinctiveness of what museums do that they do not need to be convinced of our relevance. This attitude may inhibit us from actively reaching out and finding ways to connect to new audiences, ways which would lead to change and increased relevance; it might prevent us from creating and opening doors to audiences to which we would like to be relevant. Simon’s definition of relevance is inspired by cognitive scientists Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber who believe that

¹ N. Simon, *The Art of Relevance* (Santa Cruz, Calif., 2016).

L. N. K. Van Broekhoven, ‘Calibrating relevance at the Pitt Rivers Museum’, in *Dethroning historical reputations: universities, museums and the commemoration of benefactors*, ed. J. Pellew and L. Goldman (2018), pp. 65–79.

relevance needs to involve something that yields positive cognitive effects:² ‘Something is relevant if it gives you new information, if it adds meaning to your life, if it makes a difference to you ... that ... brings new value to the table’. A museum, Simon argues, matters when it matters to people.³

An entire set of measuring sticks is used on and by museums such as the Pitt Rivers Museum (P.R.M.) to measure success, impact and relevance: visitor numbers (physical and virtual), awards and recognitions, publications, number of outgoing loans etc. Our Museum, usually, scores rather well on most accounts. While museums on the Continent and elsewhere in Britain are battling falling numbers of visitors, and are spending hundreds of thousands of pounds or euros to make special exhibitions more attractive, the visitor numbers of the P.R.M. have been rising for over a decade. Today the museum is open every day of the week, and receives nearly 450,000 visitors per year.⁴

Unlike other museums of its kind, in the P.R.M. objects are exhibited according to type, rather than geographical region, or time period. Today, its typological arrangement functions as a ‘democracy of things’, revealing fascinating distinctions between and across cultures. This encourages reflection, which can be compelling and challenging in equal measure. However, its layout is rooted in Victorian-era ideas of social evolution, and even though the collections have multiple biographies, a significant quantity of them were amassed under British colonial aspiration, rule and expansion. The Museum is much-loved for its characteristic multi-layered and dense displays, but has also been scrutinized, particularly in postcolonial writing, for unquestioningly repeating colonial paradigms (or so it seems) by embedding these in the very fabric of its collections and displays.

Does its immense popularity, evident in its visitor numbers, prove that the P.R.M. matters? And if so, what are the implications of that? How do we ensure that the typological displays are relevant today, not as a testament to human/social evolution, but as a celebration of our common humanity and as a means to bridge differences? Can it help encourage global cross-cultural reflection and cultural competence? Or is it doomed to remain a ‘preserve of colonialism’?⁵

² D. Wilson and D. Sperber, *Meaning and Relevance* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 62.

³ Simon, *The Art of Relevance*, p. 29.

⁴ Most Continental ethnographic museums receive between 120,000 and 200,000 visitors per year with far larger marketing budgets.

⁵ C. Kravagna, ‘The preserve of colonialism: the world in the museum’, *European Institute for Progressive Culture Policies*, 2008 (transl. Tim Sharp) <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0708/kravagna/en>> [accessed 16 Apr. 2018].

To calibrate

In order to consider how a museum that is so quintessentially nineteenth-century in character can be relevant in the contemporary world I propose using the concept of 'calibration'. This term describes how we constantly re-adjust ourselves to remain relevant to our audiences and how those adjustments are intended both to open doors to new audiences and often lead to more accurate narratives. These adjustments are necessary to ensure the sustainable relevance of the institution.

The *Oxford Encyclopaedia* defines the verb 'to calibrate' as:

1. To correlate the readings of (an instrument) with those of a standard in order to check the instrument's accuracy.
2. To adjust (experimental results) to take external factors into account or to allow comparison with other data.
3. To carefully assess, set, or adjust (something abstract).⁶

For people who work with machinery or instruments concerned with measurement it seems all too obvious that over time there is a tendency for results and accuracy to 'drift' from the standard, especially when using specific technologies or measuring particular parameters. Also, one accepts that standards vary from country to country, depending upon the type of industry or applications and that to ensure reliable, accurate and repeatable measurements there is an ongoing need to service and maintain the calibration of equipment throughout its lifetime. Now, museums are surely not merely measuring instruments, but one might argue that they do need regular servicing or calibrating. Museums have had a varied role throughout history and they have often had to readjust, or undergo a process of 'carefully assessing, setting or adjusting' that takes external factors into account.

Calibration also involves, for example in archaeology when assessing Carbon-14 readings, adjustment to account for long-term and shorter-term variations, and the use of probabilistic methods to calculate an acceptable range to interpret the readings and transfer them to a calendar date. Recently, again in archaeology, important shifts were unanimously adopted by practitioners to formerly accepted readings. Through a method of Bayesian inference methodologies, the output probability distributions were improved and new interpretations on long-accepted dates were proposed and accepted unanimously. As more historical data became available, and new techniques of analysis were applied, readings were readily adapted by the field.⁷ Could the same be done for museums? How would a

⁶ <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/calibrate>> [accessed 16 Apr. 2018].

⁷ R. C. Bronk, 'Bayesian analysis of radiocarbon dates', *Radiocarbon*, li (2009), 337–60.

Victorian-age museum calibrate itself to ensure relevance in the twenty-first century? There are three key questions here: what external factors should be considered, what is the 'standard', and given these, how might we adjust?

'To correlate with a standard to check accuracy'

The Pitt Rivers Museum was founded in 1884 and was opened to the public between 1887 and 1892.⁸ The museum is located at the back of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History on South Parks Road and forms part of the University of Oxford. For a long time it was open for only two hours a day and would receive small numbers of visitors at a time.

The museum was founded through a generous gift of over 27,000 objects donated by General Augustus Lane Fox, a well-known nineteenth-century collector of archaeological and ethnographic objects.⁹ The general moved in academic circles that included many of the most prominent British intellectuals of his time. Though a military man, it was through his 1853 marriage with Alice Stanley that he was welcomed into her family's more intellectual circle of friends. The thinking of some of the most important minds of the Victorian age, including biologist Charles Darwin, archaeologist Flinders Petrie and philosopher Herbert Spencer, heavily influenced the general's collecting practices. The latter's theories on sociocultural evolutionism (and moralism) were central to the general's thinking on material culture.¹⁰ His earliest collections and displays (of firearms, weaponry from around the world, boomerangs and lock-key sets) were arranged chronologically to illustrate how they developed over time from the more rudimentary to the more complex.¹¹

General Pitt Rivers was driven by a strong desire for public education and was particularly interested in museums as places where minds could be

⁸ A. Petch, 'Notes on the opening of the Pitt Rivers Museum', *Jour. Museum Ethnography*, xix (March 2007), 101–12.

⁹ Later in his life the general adopted the name Pitt Rivers when his cousin, Horace Pitt, the 6th Baron Rivers, died without heirs and left the Rivers estate to the general on the condition that he prove willing to adopt the surname Pitt Rivers and the Pitt family coat of arms (see M. Bowden, *Pitt Rivers: the Life and Archaeological Work of Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers, DCL, FRS, FSA* (Cambridge, 1991)). The general abruptly became the owner of 27,000 acres, making him one of the largest landowners in the country.

¹⁰ Darwin himself was never convinced that social evolution was analogous to biological evolution (see J. Howard, *Darwin*, v (Oxford, 1982), quoted in Bowden, *Pitt Rivers*, at p. 48).

¹¹ M. O'Hanlon, *The Pitt Rivers Museum: a World Within* (London and Oxford, 2014), pp. 24–5, 28–9.

shaped. He was acutely aware of the fact that museums, if they were to be places of public education, needed to open their doors to wider audiences. To do that they needed to find doors that were of relevance to those audiences and therefore: ‘must be supplemented by other inducements to make them attractive’.¹² In his museum in Farnham (a second museum he built after having donated his collections to the University of Oxford) there were picnic bowers, dining halls, statues, a temple, an open-air theatre, a band-stand, a race-course and a golf course. It was by finding what mattered to them that Pitt Rivers made the museum in Farnham relevant. Visitor figures to the estate were very high: in 1899, for example, 44,417 visitors were recorded. At the end of the nineteenth century, the general was convinced that museums could be used as spaces in which to persuade lay audiences that the answers to the future were in evolution not revolution.¹³

In Oxford, the museum that was named after the general and the one I currently direct was driven by a similar quest for public education. A panel placed near the museum’s entrance in the 1890s explained the ‘arrangement and object of this collection’.¹⁴ None of the original ‘objectives’ of the museum – showing how objects evolve from the simpler to the complex; explaining the conservatism of ‘savage races’; demonstrating ‘how progress has been effected’; illustrating the corresponding stages of civilization that ‘savages’ go through etc. – correspond at all with the museum’s current mission statement, nor with the vision outlined in our Strategic Plan for 2017–22: ‘to build and share knowledge about humanity’s many ways of knowing, being, creating and coping in our interconnected worlds with the widest possible audience’. We see our displays as a celebration of human creativity that encourage global cross-cultural reflection, and as a tribute to cultural diversity. In a world that is increasingly divided, can we mobilize our collections, our displays and our space to bring people closer together, to engage with each other more respectfully, out of curiosity not prejudice, looking beyond binaries and searching for possibilities?

One of our guiding principles is to aim to be ‘part of a process of redress and social healing and the mending of historically difficult relationships’.

¹² A. H. L. F. Pitt Rivers, ‘Typological museums, as exemplified by the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, and his provincial museum at Farnham, Dorset’, *Jour. Society of Arts*, xl (1891), 115–22.

¹³ ‘The knowledge of the facts of evolution, and of the processes of gradual development, is the one great knowledge that we have to inculcate’ (Pitt Rivers, ‘Typological museums’ (1891)) <<http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/rpr/index.php/article-index/12-articles/189-typological-museums.html>> [accessed 16 Apr. 2018].

¹⁴ Information Panel, PRM Papers, Box 11, Item 7 in O’Hanlon, *The Pitt Rivers Museum*, p. 54.

And we aim to be a listening and learning organization that inspires creativity in all its many forms. But are we?

'To adjust to take external factors into account'

The P.R.M. is proud to be appreciated by its audiences. So much so that both in more formal benchmarking exercises (the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions – A.L.V.A.) and via online customer feedback channels on social media (Facebook, Yelp, Google, TripAdvisor), we score among the highest in the U.K. As with many other visitor attractions in the U.K., the P.R.M. is benchmarked by the A.L.V.A. Visitors indicate they want to broaden their horizons and see the museum as a trusted source of information worth visiting. Of all U.K. A.L.V.A. visitor destinations, the P.R.M. receives the highest 'Net Promoter Score' that measures the overall likelihood of whether one would promote a visit to others (+87 for P.R.M., average +60). Also, of all participating A.L.V.A. members the P.R.M. receives the highest score in terms of 'value for money' (9.4 for P.R.M., average 8.3).

Over 600,000 ethnographic and archaeological objects, photographs, films, sound recordings and manuscripts from every area of the world are kept in the Museum's collections, each with its own biography, and pedigree. 55,000 of those are on display and nearly all are shared with global audiences through online databases. The extraordinary range of objects that form the collections of the Museum have been assembled from all over the world and are testament to social networks forged over time and in very different sorts of conditions, some being the result of colonial exploitation and duress, others the result of long-lasting deep friendships, academic research or diplomatic ties.¹⁵

A quick review of visitors' comments – online, in visitor books at the entrance, in published tour guides and in newspaper articles in the national and international press – does not show much critical reflection on how the collection or displays are interwoven with the legacies of empire. Apart from praise like: 'friendly staff', 'the best museum in the world', 'could spend hours', 'great for all ages', 'amazing collection' and 'free entry', frequently mentioned tropes include 'shrunken heads', 'totem poles', 'treasure trove', 'Indiana Jones', 'Grandmother's Attic' and 'Aladdin's cave'. Thus, in reviewing the Museum, people tend to call on iconic images from popular culture that might seem innocent at first glance, but considered more carefully also bring to mind unsettling racialized stereotypes that could be considered to have their roots in Orientalism,

¹⁵ For example, see <<http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/england/englishness-english-databases.html>> [accessed 16 Apr. 2018].

colonialism or racism. To refer to a place as an Aladdin's cave is to say that place contains many interesting or valuable objects. The cave, inspired by Ali Baba's cave from 'Arabian Nights', refers to an amazing place, where all manner of goods are stored, conveying an idea of mystery, awe and (hidden) wealth (that is, 'Les contes des mille et une nuits' in French). The reference to Aladdin immediately brings to mind the racialized stereotypical representation of Arab individuals in the 1992 Disney film.¹⁶ Similarly, to describe something as a 'treasure trove' means that it is a very good or rich source of something. In the U.K., the expression also had a legal implication up until 1996, suggesting it was connected to a law where valuable articles, such as coins, bullion, etc. found hidden in the earth or elsewhere, and of unknown ownership, would become the property of the crown (which compensated the finder if the treasure was declared). In 1996 'treasure' was legally defined as any item over 300 years old and containing more than 5 per cent precious metal. The reference to Indiana Jones, similarly conjures up images of tomb looting, and of 'rescuing' objects from failing nation states or peoples who cannot take care of their own heritage.

The Shrunken Heads (or *tsantsas*) of the Pitt Rivers Museum are generally seen as 'one of the best-known displays of human remains of Latin American origin in the UK' and are specifically mentioned by numerous newspaper articles and tourist reviews.¹⁷ They are often seen as one of the hallmarks of the museum and, anecdotally, the museum's front of house staff report the three questions most commonly asked by visitors coming through the door are: 'where are the toilets?', 'where is the café?' and 'where are the Shrunken Heads?'. Interviews with visitors looking at the display carried out in 2003, reveal that many people think of these objects as 'primitive', referring to them as 'gory, gruesome, barbaric, mystical, a freak show, unnatural'. People reported feeling 'strangeness' and feeling 'disgusted' and felt that the exhibit sparked their interest out of 'morbid curiosity' and brought up 'primal feelings'.¹⁸ These responses suggest that

¹⁶ 'The film's light-skinned lead characters, Aladdin and Jasmine, have Anglicized features and Anglo-American accents. This is in contrast to the other characters who are dark-skinned, swarthy and villainous – cruel palace guards or greedy merchants with Arabic accents and grotesque facial features ... the film immediately characterizes the Arab world as alien, exotic, and "other." Arab Americans see this film as perpetuating the tired stereotype of the Arab world as a place of deserts and camels, of arbitrary cruelty and barbarism.' (The American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee <<http://www.adc.org/2009/11/arab-stereotypes-and-american-educators/>> [accessed 16 Apr. 2018]).

¹⁷ P. Gordon, "'Tongued with fire": encounters with museum visitors and displayed human remains' (unpublished University of London Ph.D. thesis, 2009), p. 18.

¹⁸ P. Gordon, 'Life after death: the social transformation of Tsantsas', in 'Material

instead of helping visitors better understand the practice of headhunting, many saw the exhibit as a metaphor for the primitive behaviour of ‘others’. On the other hand, other interviewees felt the same exhibits encouraged people to acknowledge cultural diversity and to develop a broader ‘world view’, as well as ‘sparking curiosity’ to learn more about other people’s cultures.¹⁹ In other museums Shuar and Ashuar representatives (present-day descendants of the makers of the *tsantsas*) have argued either for the return, contextualization or removal from display of *tsantsas* as they no longer wish their culture only to be ‘represented’ through these ‘powerful visual anchors for stereotyping’.²⁰ Rubenstein has argued, convincingly, that the displaying of shrunken heads, more than many other objects in museums: ‘provoke ambivalent feelings about the past and uncertainties about their meanings in the present’. For museum curators and visitors, he says, ‘they indicate the power of a museum to represent the whole world under one roof, but they also represent a distasteful obsession with savagery left over from the age of colonial expansion and exploration’. There is no simple answer to whether or not the *tsantsas* should or should not remain on display as they are and can be read in many ways. ‘For Shuar, they recall the power and independence of their fathers or grandfathers, but they also remind them of a time when escalating warfare devastated many Shuar households, in some cases reducing their population by half’.²¹ At the same time they are also seen to be functioning as ambassadors of Shuar culture: ‘the presence of the heads in the museum expressed North American interest in Shuar culture’, representing thereby ‘a Shuar presence in the centre of the world’.²²

In particular, indigenous scholars and activists have criticized ethnographic museums for interpreting cultures through practices of ‘othering’. Locking objects, and the people that made them, in static representations can have the effect of objectifying and manipulating them so that they can fit categories and outlooks that are alien to the individuals who forged and designed the objects. This often involves eliminating the sacral or cultural dimensions of the objects in order that they can be

anthropology and museum ethnography of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology’ (unpublished University of Oxford M.Sc. thesis, 2003), p. 32.

¹⁹ Gordon, ‘Life after death’, p. 36.

²⁰ S. L. Rubenstein, ‘Shuar migrants and shrunken heads face to face in a New York museum’, *Anthropology Today*, xx (2004), 15–18. See also R. W. West, *All Roads are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture* (Washington, D.C., 1994); L. Peers, *Shrunken Heads* (Oxford, 2011).

²¹ S. L. Rubenstein, ‘Crossing boundaries and shrunken heads’, in *Border Crossings: Transnational Americanist Anthropology*, ed. K. S. Fine-Dare and S. L. Rubenstein (Lincoln, Nebr., 2009), p. 128.

²² S. L. Rubenstein, ‘Crossing boundaries’ (2009), p. 142.

understood by onlookers.²³ Simply taking the *tsantsas* off display without entering into conversations with Shuar and Ashuar descendants on how they would prefer to be represented within the museum would be a missed opportunity for inviting in voices that need to be heard by audiences who we know are interested in broadening their horizons.

In recent years, the museum has undergone much critical introspection, published extensively on practices of collecting, made changes in our public programmes, and undertaken extensive work with indigenous peoples on reconnecting historical collections with present-day stakeholders. Visitors' comments indicate that despite this work we have still not found a compelling way of translating that thinking and teaching into the permanent displays and galleries, so that instead of finding confirmation of stereotypical images and concepts, visitors coming into the museum develop a deeper understanding of humanity's many ways of knowing, being and coping through time.

'To carefully assess, set or adjust'

On 23 October 2015, *Rhodes Must Fall* tweeted that the 'Pitt-Rivers museum is one of the most violent spaces in Oxford'. Brian Kwoba, at the time a Rhodes Scholar and doctoral student at Oxford, wrote an article in *Cherwell*, the student newspaper, explaining that the university:

is choked with various Rhodes-like products of colonial plunder, from the Codrington Library at All Souls College, which was endowed with money from Christopher Codrington's colonial slave plantations in Barbados, to the Pitt Rivers Museum which houses thousands of artefacts stolen from colonised peoples throughout the world.²⁴

Similar calls to decolonize disciplines, institutions and methodologies have been made insistently both in academic literature and elsewhere.²⁵ A wide range of protests erupted in 2015 and 2016 across the U.S., continental Europe and the U.K., which questioned colonial paradigms, orientalism, gentrification and the impact they have on museums. The following are a few specific examples. The 2012 to 2016 #DecolonizeTheMuseum Critical

²³ L. N. K. Van Broekhoven, 'Ethnographic heterotopia' ('Proceedings of the International Colloquium: do Ethnographic Museums Need Ethnography?' Rome: Pigorini Museum, 17–19 Apr. 2012).

²⁴ B. Kwoba, see <<http://www.cherwell.org/2015/06/12/rhodes-must-fall-here-and-now>> [accessed 30 July 2017].

²⁵ A. Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012); see also L. T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York, 1999 and 2012).

Dethroning historical reputations

Communities' Collective in the Netherlands named its cause as being to decolonize Dutch ethnographic museums. A 'Decolonize this place' protest was staged outside the American Museum of Natural History in New York City on 10 October 2016; several protests took place at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston under the banner 'Decolonize our Museums' (D.O.M.), and the Decolonial Cultural Front (D.C.F.) held protests in 2016 at the Brooklyn Museum.²⁶

As elsewhere, at Oxford persistent challenges are being made – particularly by grassroots and student movements such as 'Rhodes Must Fall' and 'Common Ground' – that highlight enduring structures and symbols of inequality and oppression and call for these to be altered. Clearly, the P.R.M. does not escape such criticism, and, as its director, I know that even though for many of our visitors the museum belongs in the category of one their 'all-time favourite museums in the world' (often nostalgically transporting people back to the magical years of their youth), the museum can be interpreted differently by our audiences, depending on personal biography and visual literacy. More than most other museums, the P.R.M. is seen as a museum whose very space contains echoes of empire. With its 'museum of the museum' aura it seemingly breathes life into a celebration of colonialism instead of contesting it or engaging with it.

In a place like the P.R.M. time seems to be frozen, and visitors and volunteers alike indicate they feel one of the most difficult elements to grasp in the museum is the concept of time: how do things relate to each other? Yet, as one would expect of a museum of international repute, when one looks more closely at interpretation labels, teaching, displays, current acquisitions and publications, it becomes apparent that most of the original 1890s 'arrangement' of the displays and collection strategies no longer apply to current practices. According to some, the museum has already 'radically changed its discourse'.²⁷ And, to a large degree, it has.

²⁶ These protests also challenge the gentrification and displacement unfolding just outside the marble walls of museums, in poor communities of colour of the surrounding city that are excluded from what are considered more elite cultural spheres; they are typically action-oriented and some are becoming more and more intersectional, putting indigenous struggle, black liberation, free Palestine, global wage workers and de-gentrification at their centre (<<http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/5084>> [accessed 17 Apr. 2018]; <<http://www.decolonizethisplace.org>> [accessed 17 Apr. 2018]).

²⁷ A. Sauvage, 'To be or not to be colonial: museums facing their exhibitions', *Culturales*, vi (2010), 110.

This is less easily visible to our visitors, however, than we might ideally want it to be now and in the future. In 1998, with a new director and two new lecturer-curators in post, the staff held a discussion on the question ‘What should an ethnographic museum be in the twenty-first century?’ According to one staff member present, ‘the subtext was, should we rip it all out and start again’. It was agreed that the historic nature of the displays had value as an articulation of Britain’s encounters with other peoples, and given other pressing issues facing the museum at that time (the need to re-roof and add insulation, the need for major funding and research grants) the consensus was ‘not to tinker with the displays too much and to focus on scholarly and collaborative research behind the scenes, publishing online for the public and in academic venues’.²⁸ This decision to ‘respect the special visual spirit of the displays’ and concentrate on the development of new practices around the collections was, therefore, a deliberate strategy chosen at a particular moment in time which made sense given other simultaneous institutional needs. It led to numerous pioneering and invaluable projects around the documentation of the collection, the production of award-winning online resources and much innovative collaborative museum work with originating communities. It also stimulated the development of an unrivalled open research policy through fully accessible online databases that not only provide all our available data in an easily searchable format, but include comments made during visits by scholars and the wider cultural sector – by global standards this is an exceptional feature for a museum. Online resources have been transformative for their respective fields such as *The Tibet Album* website project, used widely by Tibetan scholars and Tibetans living in exile; *The Kainai Visual Repatriation Project* that inspired colleagues across the globe to initiate similar projects; *Scoping Museum Anthropology* (<http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/sma/>) that made unique primary historic documents available online; and many more.

Nonetheless, in contrast to European museums, which have attempted to refashion themselves by renaming and refurbishment as part of a process of ‘rebirthing’ (for example, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris or the VärldskulturMuseum in Gotenburg), the P.R.M. has been held up as an example of a museum that attests to the ‘denial of coevalness’. This is in reference to Fabian’s seminal analysis in *Time and the Other* of the persistent and systematic tendency to place the object of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer or subject of anthropological discourse. This ‘present tense’, declares Fabian, ‘freezes a society at the time

²⁸ P.R.M. staff member, Laura Peers, personal communication.

of observation; at worst, it contains assumptions about the repetitiveness, predictability and conservatism of primitives'.²⁹

*Changing lightbulbs*³⁰

Linda Alcoff maintains that in 'certain privileged locations' it can be 'discursively dangerous' to speak for others.³¹ In other words, when the privileged speak for or on behalf of the less privileged, it has the result of increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for. The Pitt Rivers Museum certainly seems to qualify as one of these 'privileged locations': set in the University of Oxford and filled with objects from across the world. Museums and their staff, especially university museums, like the P.R.M., are seen to be authorities on their collections and their display, and often that involves processes of both inclusion and exclusion of voices.

In recent decades, different ethnographic museums have acknowledged that indigenous peoples, racialized minorities, and stakeholder communities are authorities on their own cultures and have set up more collaborative ways of working. This has demonstrated that where joint expertise is shared – and authority is negotiated (rather than assumed) – new light shines on collections, and new contemporary relevance is revealed that enables museums to become part of the processes of healing and redress. Such collaborations involve the willingness to work towards co-creative knowledge production and to see museum objects not merely as 'things' but as potentially animate, as embodying sets of relationships, as having personhood and needing cultural care as much as physical preservation or interpretation.

Members of the P.R.M.'s academic, collections, education and conservation staff have been at the forefront of developing and trialling this sort of collaborative work and have published extensively on it to critical acclaim. Owing to strategic choices made in the past, that critical writing and thinking has been concentrated on work 'behind the scenes' that can be found online and in our publications, but it is now ready to be translated to our more permanent displays. In other words, the 'static' public face of our museum does not always reflect that we are at the forefront of

²⁹ J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its Objects* (New York, N.Y., 1983), p. 80. See also Kravanga.

³⁰ This subtitle refers to a 'joke' I was told over and over when I arrived at Oxford to take up my post as director. At least a dozen people independently told me the same joke each time I mentioned the word change: 'How many Oxford professors does it take to change a lightbulb?' ... the answer: 'change?'

³¹ L. Alcoff, 'The problem of speaking for others', *Cultural Critique*, xx (1991–2), 5–32.

establishing collaborative museology, opening doors to previously uninvited communities, engaging with stakeholders near and far. In consequence, we are ready to ask the next questions and are engaging in qualitative audience research into the experience of non-specialist visitors when they walk through the galleries. What messages do they find? What sides of the stories do we tell, and which ones do we not touch upon? Which parts do we silence, and which do we voice?

We might seem to have inherited the most difficult space in which to try to achieve this. But it could be argued that an intrinsically imperial and Victorian museum such as the P.R.M. makes us the perfect space in which to engage with, and address such issues and responses. We must also set out ideas for making new acquisitions that ensure that our collections connect with the contemporary as much as they reflect the past. Until now, interpretation at the P.R.M. (object labels, audio guides and display texts) has striven to be 'as neutral as possible'. As I have argued elsewhere, this 'neutrality' does not exist. We are always careful to use certain words and avoid others. If we interrogate the language we use, the visual representations in our displays, on our web and in our special exhibitions or promotional material, it becomes clear that some of the language we have uncritically adopted actually perpetuates the very representational issues and stereotypical misconceptions outlined above, rather than enabling our visitors to question them, and move beyond them.

I want to ensure that in the future when we talk about, for example, the Cook voyages, we consciously use historically accurate descriptions and avoid perpetuating ideas of Pacific Romanticism born from a European imagination. On labels, do we continue to talk about the Britons' 'arrival,' calling them 'traders', 'missionaries' and 'colonial powers', instead of using other, more recently proposed terminology, that is seen as more historically accurate and cannot be interpreted as euphemistic?³² In the future, when we re-display or work with the Benin Bronzes, how do we more poignantly address the violent nature of the punitive campaigns that brought the collections here as loot and then sold the objects to museums in Europe to cover the cost of those same campaigns? We are setting up collaborations with a diversity of partners across the globe and also in Oxford to engage critically with these questions and provide alternatives to the institutional voice and the accepted narratives.

³² University of New South Wales, Sydney, *Indigenous Terminology*, 2016 <<https://teaching.unsw.edu.au/indigenous-terminology>> [accessed 17 Apr. 2018].

Concluding remarks

Museums tend to fulfil many functions at once: a meeting place, a place for inspiration and reflection, a learning environment, a connector of communities and – more mundanely – a shelter from the rain. We know our displays and exhibitions can talk about humanity's many ways of knowing and many ways of being, of coping and creating, but we also know that it is only when we curate carefully and programme thoughtfully and with purpose that the displays will tell meaningful stories that will resonate with *all* our audiences and with the bigger issues facing the world today.

Much has been written about the benefits and limitations to the P.R.M. of its nineteenth-century layout and displays. For some, it remains a symbol of the Victorian colonialism that facilitated the building of those collections. But its very origin can also provoke a constructive response: because its 'displays are now so outdated ... they challenge visitors to consider what the European practice of collecting has meant to colonized peoples'.³³ And precisely because of its controversial inheritances, the P.R.M. has confronted and commented on its collections' colonial pasts more than many other museums. Nevertheless, that concepts and tropes such as 'treasure trove', 'Victorian grandeur' and 'colonial exploration' are named by a large quantity of the visitors in their comments – and largely as *positive* attributes – indicates that there is still some critical reflection and refurbishing that needs to be done as it relates to the construction of meaning and (un)conscious messaging.

Now, when we are being called 'one of the most Violent Spaces in Oxford' by student and grassroots movements, we must engage with criticism proactively and find ways to ensure that we change, though not by adapting a defensive position in which we try to show how much we have already achieved (and there is quite a bit), but by prioritizing what we have not yet done. We must also acknowledge that although processes of political decolonization might be more than seventy years old, the legacies of colonialism and empire continue to taint our understanding of the world and continue to influence its social contexts, political realities and historical records.³⁴

We see our museum as intimately involved in the development of strategies that open up original pathways that help us cope with these tangled histories as part of a process of healing. We also see it as our duty, when necessary, to

³³ Sauvage, 'To be or not to be colonial', p. 110.

³⁴ W. D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham, N.C., 2011); *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity and the Legacy of Imperialism*, ed. K. Nicolaidis, B. Sèbe and G. Maas (2015).

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acknowledge historical wrongs that lie at the root of the current politics of inequality, so that we can actively counter any perpetuation of colonialism and its consequent stereotyping and imbalances of power.

Taking into account the museum's current mission as outlined earlier, we are actively investing in becoming a museum that opens its doors to ensure that the audiences to which we hope to be of personal relevance both find us and feel at home in the museum. Looking at 'relevance' for the Pitt Rivers Museums involves engaging with difficult societal debates and political realities of today, so that in our galleries we can address the tension between repeating dominant histories and presenting alternative voices, telling histories of resistance without losing the opportunity to continue to amaze, inspire and spark curiosity for each other's creativity.

