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STUDENT: Catherine Arias, MAAA ’20

TITLE: From Exploration to Equity: A Museum’s Journey Toward Decolonization

NOMINATING PROFESSOR: Rachelle Browne

FROM EXPLORATION TO EQUITY:

A MUSEUM'S JOURNEY

TOWARD DECOLONIZATION

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ABSTRACT

In the context of a societal shift calling upon institutions to be more equitable, the movement to decolonize museums requires new approaches to collecting and presenting human remains and cultural artifacts. Nearly thirty years after the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, the San Diego Museum of Man is radically modifying its relationship with indigenous communities of the Kumeyaay Nation, on whose homeland the museum is situated and whose ancestors and belongings were once held by the museum without permission. The museum's bold new policies and programming focus offer a complex, but necessary, model for the field.

INTRODUCTION

Museum leaders, like those of many other institutions during what former Walker Art Center director Olga Viso calls “a time of great societal reckoning around race and gender,” find themselves confronted with questions of accountability and power in long-accepted practices. In holding, presenting, and interpreting objects, museums must now consider how a movement to decolonize the museum—which requires institutions to acknowledge their troubling history of land use, cultural appropriation, and provenance of objects—should change their practices. Nearly thirty years after the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, or NAGPRA, museums such as the San Diego Museum of Man, or SDMoM, are enacting new internal policies and practices that provide a model for others to follow. These new practices include voluntary compliance with NAGPRA, involving indigenous people in the museum’s presentation and interpretation of their own cultural artifacts, and extending the principles of NAGPRA to indigenous communities not otherwise included in the Act (Garcia).

As Elizabeth Merritt of the Center for the Future of Museums and the American Alliance of Museums puts it, “At the heart of modern museum work is the tension between our mission to preserve the past, and a moral obligation to confront the bias and inequities entangled with that inheritance. The history, mindset, and material culture of colonization are deeply embedded in our institutions” (Howarth). SDMoM’s recently-enacted, highly progressive approach stands in sharp contrast to its previous hundred

years of collecting, research, and display; a fortuitous mix of internal conditions and external pressures have made this possible.

FACTS

Founded in 1915 as part of an exposition to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal, SDMoM's purpose was to "showcase the arts and sciences and to promote the progress and promise of San Diego" ("San Diego's Vision"). Unfortunately, this enthusiasm for scientific progress ignored the wishes and sovereignty of the Kumeyaay people, on whose land the museum is situated and whose ancestors' mummified remains and funerary belongings were displayed. Following the 1990 passage of NAGPRA, which requires federally-funded institutions to repatriate indigenous remains, the museum nevertheless "refused to recognize the origin of the ancestors on display, and subsequently refused to repatriate them to the local Kumeyaay Nation" (Mandel).

Representatives of the Kumeyaay people—comprised of thirteen federally recognized tribes in Southern California, and who date their presence in what is now the Southern California and Baja Mexico region for 12,000 years ("Kumeyaay History")—petitioned the museum for decades for the return of the remains and associated objects. SDMoM deputy director Ben Garcia traces this "tireless advocacy" to at least 1978, the date of the oldest letter from the Kumeyaay that museum staff has discovered in its files. Since the passage of NAGPRA, SDMoM had been working, in Garcia's words, only "minimally in compliance to the letter of the law, but certainly not the spirit of the law." While the museum had repatriated some remains, it "in many other instances had not recognized tribal lines of evidence for repatriations. And so [it] was still holding onto

many ancestors that…the homeland community here, the Kumeyaay Nation, had been requesting to have returned."

A shakeup in the museum's staff provided the right opportunity to shift its practices. After a financial crisis and the ousting of its director, in 2010, newly hired director Micah Parzen began refocusing the museum's emphasis away from scholarly research and toward a more publicly responsive and relevant stance, "shifting its exhibits toward an emphasis on minorities and holding standing-room-only discussions" on current events (Dotinga). While aware of NAGPRA and the museum's troubling relationship to its holdings—Parzen was an attorney after a career in anthropology—his initial priority was not to examine the museum's collections management policies, but rather to shore up its finances by "being seen as relevant to a broad community" (Garcia).

Garcia's own history had included a stint at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Archeology on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, where he was horrified to discover its extremely poorly maintained and out-of-NAGPRA-compliance holding of indigenous remains and belongings. As a University staff member, Garcia was powerless to force the museum to improve its practices. Indeed, only a new state law signed by the governor in October, Assembly Bill 2836—essentially a California-specific version of NAGPRA which explicitly mentions the Hearst—seems likely to prompt reforms there ("AB-2836"). When Parzen offered Garcia the position of deputy director, Garcia made "a complete commitment to repatriation" a condition of his hire, to which Parzen eagerly agreed (Garcia).

Emboldened by Parzen's focus on relevance and joined by a collections manager whose position on repatriation mirrored his own, Garcia reached out to Kumeyaay representatives "about what their priorities were in terms of their relationship with the museum." As SDMoM staff discovered, "It was immediately clear to us that there was no basis for a real relationship until this issue had been addressed" (Garcia).

ISSUES

In a nutshell, NAGPRA requires federal agencies and museums to repatriate the remains and objects of federally-recognized tribes. Set forth in statute through 25 U.S.C. 3001 and accompanying regulations at 43 CFR 10, NAGPRA, administered by the Department of the Interior, governs two processes: one for overseeing the return of objects held in collections and a land process for items removed from lands after 1990. Legal recognition of any return of remains or objects occurs upon publication of notice in the *Federal Register*, managed by the National Park Service. The considerable efforts of both the Kumeyaay and SDMoM illustrate how challenging the enforcement and implementation of NAGPRA can be. Among the thorny issues are resolving the question of which communities qualify as federally-recognized, and the difficulty of substantiating the cultural relationship between specific human remains or objects in a collection with a particular indigenous community (Chari and Lavallee).

For example, the Kumeyaay ultimately prevailed in a long struggle for the return of the remains of two ancestors excavated by archeologists for study in 1976. Found on land owned at the time by the University of California at San Diego, archeologists

insisted that the 9,000-year-old remains could not be proven culturally affiliated to the Kumeyaay. The Kumeyaay disputed this and requested the return of the remains by the university in 2000, finally suing in 2012, two years after NAGPRA was amended to allow remains found within specific tribal lands to be repatriated, even if “cultural affiliation” could not be proven. Scientists argued that the value of studying the remains outweighed that of the Kumeyaay’s claim to them, and took their case to court (Alther, “Kumeyaay,” Thanawala). When the university published notice of its agreement to return the remains, the archeologists filed a temporary restraining order, and later the same week, a lawsuit in District Court against both the university and the Kumeyaay Cultural Repatriation Committee to prevent the remains from being returned. The Court granted defendants’ motions to dismiss, the Ninth Circuit denied the scientists’ appeal, and the Supreme Court refused to grant cert (Alther).

To be clear, SDMoM’s decision to comply with NAGPRA is voluntary; as a private 501(c)3 organization, it is not a federal agency. A staff member explained, “You have to take staff and your board and other stakeholders institutionally down to help them get to a place where they understand why a museum would voluntarily potentially surrender without being required to do so by law” (Joyner). By doing this, an institution begins to shift the balance of power from the arguments for scientific research toward the rights of indigenous people. An official at Arizona State University surmised, “The public and scientific interest in [the remains] no longer have any weight.” Instead, as Kumeyaay Cultural Repatriation Committee member Louis Guassac argues, “This isn’t stuff. You don’t do this to people…You respect them” (Thanawala).

The ethical intent of NAGPRA was made clear by Senator Daniel Inouye during his testimony on its enactment: “In light of the important role that death and burial rites play in Native American cultures, it is all the more offensive that the civil rights of America’s first citizens have been so flagrantly violated for the past century. Mr. President, the bill before us today is not about the validity of museums or the value of scientific inquiry. Rather it is about human rights” (Chari and Lavallee).

Scientists arguing for the public interest of holding remains and belongings “had been working with an assumption that indigenous communities were going to die out, and that their belongings, their lifeways and their languages needed to be preserved for future generations,” according to Garcia (Tanigawa). However, “[u]nlike the early anthropologists’ belief that Native Americans were a race doomed to vanish…tribes are thriving. The Kumeyaay bands represent themselves on the internet, operate eight casinos, and federal recognition supports certain rights” while they “still struggle” with federal and state authorities over various issues, including those affecting the U.S.-Mexico border, which cuts through their ancestral land (Joyner).

OUTCOME

By January 2016, SDMoM posted notice of its repatriation of 66 individuals and 82 funerary objects back to the Kumeyaay (National Park Service). Using a template from the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, SDMoM staff drafted a new Policy on the Curation of Human Remains requiring adherence to a minimum standard of informed written consent, which was adopted by the board of trustees the following

year. Museum-wide staff training on the evolving ethics of anthropological collections, the formation of an internal Decolonization Working Group, as well as grant funding from the National Park Service—which administers the implementation of NAGPRA—and the Institute for Museum and Library Services provided the resources needed to make the shift (Connolly et al.).

In the spring of 2017, Garcia represented SDMoM and apologized on the museum's behalf at a Kumeyaay reburial ceremony of remains returned by numerous museums. "One of the things that has been challenging for a lot of indigenous communities is that they've had to create ceremony for activities that their ancestors did not imagine would be required," Garcia said.

For its part, SDMoM plans to go even farther toward repairing its relationship with indigenous communities and is poised to implement a new Colonial Pathways Policy approved by the board in June. This new policy mandates that the museum secure "documented consent" for any object it holds and make eligible for return "any cultural resource that an indigenous community has determined constitutes cultural matrimony/patrimony, and belongs with that community." The impact of the policy makes eighty percent of its "approximately 75,000 ethnographic items, and archeology from more than 1,000 sites" subject to "consultation with descendant communities" (San Diego Museum of Man). Not only will this require a great deal of effort, but it stands to radically change the holdings and curatorial emphasis of the museum. "Something like this," Garcia said of the museum's policy changes, "moves away from the idea of amassing and holding…to one that is more about relationship and it requires you to

maintain a respectful and mutual relationship if you want to be able to tell the stories of the communities whose belongings you're going to present" (Tanigawa).

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATION

SDMoM's efforts to decolonize will certainly result in a full-scale change of its institutional character, a process which has been well underway for several years with its transition away from a research focus on humanity to a more experiential and inviting one. Recent exhibitions have explored themes such as the construction of racial difference, cross-cultural depictions of monsters, and the history of beer (Garcia, Peterson). Still, these transformation will not be easy. As it forges its new path, vestiges of its past remain in plain view. For example, even as the museum seeks public input on changing its name to something "that better reflects our values of inclusivity, equity, and love; better describes all the people we serve and the stories we want to tell; and fully embodies our mission of inspiring human connections by exploring the human experience" ("Museum Renaming Process"), it has not provided new context for its historical practices on every page of its website. Its initial exhibition, *The Story of Man Through the Ages*, is still described as promoting "anthropology as a science while forming the nucleus of a permanent museum with collections of lasting scientific value" ("History"). In the words of Olga Viso, "Systemic change takes time, vision and nuanced leadership at every level, most especially among donors and museum boards. Selfless investment and fortitude are required. So is a willingness to endure discomfort. To move forward, the entire ecosystem must devote itself to a longer game."

At stake is nothing less than the recognition of the sovereignty, resilience, and ongoing needs of indigenous peoples as a part of the human family, regardless of the effort required. SDMoM's new Colonial Pathways Policy goes even further than returning items taken through acts of colonizing power. For example, it sets forth a procedure to return items that may have been acquired "in a decolonized manner, but in the time between the acquisition and today, conditions in that indigenous community changed and there was additional cultural loss due to the impact of colonization." The policy cites an example of a wooden canoe properly commissioned in 1915 by the museum from a Chumash boat builder but later requested by present-day Chumash to relearn the lost art of their ancestors' boat building techniques. Museum trustees approved this transfer to "provide the community with an object of great meaning and significance."

Almost thirty years after NAGPRA's passage, a great deal of work remains to be done to comply with and extend its provisions toward a fuller decolonization. Following centuries of pressure and protest by Native Americans, museums like SDMoM, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, and the Abbe Museum are leading the way (Connolly et al.) These new practices offer current and future generations a clearer understanding of the lives of indigenous people—not as specimens for analysis but as partners in repairing centuries of wrongdoing. Like SDMoM, museums that consider decolonization may find themselves finding new and equitable ways to fulfill their missions of human connection.

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Museums, like many institutions today, are reckoning with public demands for equity and redress of past wrongs. This paper examined the decolonization efforts of the San Diego Museum of Man, an institution whose collection and display of human remains reflected attitudes and values typical of the time of its founding in 1915. Over a century later, the museum has enacted bold new policies that go beyond compliance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) to repair and reposition its relationship to local indigenous communities of the Kumeyaay Nation.

Goucher College Library's academic and personnel resources were indispensable in illuminating this complicated, thorny topic. For a distance learning student like me, accessing its vast holdings online was critical in gathering both overarching contextual information and extremely specific detail. An excellent resource for understanding the complexity and implications of NAGPRA's implementation, *Accomplishing NAGPRA: Perspectives on the Intent, Impact, and Future of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act*, was available in its entirety as an e-book.

The online library catalogue also surfaced an unpublished graduate thesis by a Northern Arizona University applied anthropology student who had recently interned at San Diego Museum of Man. Her internship and thesis focused on the museum's efforts to decolonize, included invaluable staff perspectives on those efforts, and described in-depth the history of the Kumeyaay's relationship to the museum. While the citation for

the thesis was easy to locate, finding an accessible version was difficult until I made an inquiry to user services librarian Kristen Shonbron. Within no more than five minutes, Shonborn shot back a reply with a link to the thesis, which proved critical to my research.

Goucher College Library's considerable holdings, encompassing not only broad academic topics but also incredibly specific ones, as well as its responsive and knowledgeable staff, are an essential resource for grounding our studies in current research and connecting our work to that of other scholars.