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## Death to the Museum (As We Know It): A California Art and History Museum Designs a Different Cultural Exhibit

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## Introduction

When I say death to the museum, I am referring to its end as the sole authority figure on cultural memory, and am foreseeing its rebirth as an inclusive space. While we cannot simply erase the museum's ties to racism and classism, that rebirth can begin with changing curatorial practices. Exhibits are a good place to start because they are the sites where curators and visitors interact, interpret, and share ideas through objects on display.<sup>1</sup> Guests understand exhibition content as fact, and the museum's power to create that level of authority stems from being seen as a repository of knowledge and objects.<sup>2</sup> Maintaining that level of authority requires keeping the visitor passive, only soaking in the curator's voice and the art objects in the exhibit.<sup>3</sup> Still, people love museums – not because of their prestige, but rather because they are the last few places to be inspired or enlightened.<sup>4</sup> Society has come to a point where we at least see and at most live in diversity, which means museums must also anticipate different meanings to be made from their exhibitions.

One California museum that has adapted to this paradigm shift is New Museum Los Gatos (NUMU Los Gatos), a mid-size art and history museum, and their exhibition titled: *Reclamation: Resilience of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe*. In addition to bringing this exhibition to life through a research practicum, I spoke with Cristiano Colantoni, NUMU Los Gatos' Director of Exhibitions and Collections, about *Reclamation* and the nuances of decolonizing museums. Their radical collaboration with the Muwekma can serve as an example for museums to negotiate legal logistics regarding repatriation and the ownership of indigenous remains and artifacts, something both museum institutions and the CSU system significantly lag in. The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe consists of surviving American Indian Lineages aboriginal to the San Francisco Bay Region who trace their ethno-historic origins from indigenous tribes forced to relocate to Mission San Jose, Mission Santa Clara, and Mission Dolores during Spanish occupation in the late

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<sup>1</sup>Baxandall, Michael, ed. by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects" in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, 1991, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2nd Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Duncan, Carol, ed. by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, "Art Museums and the Rituals of Citizenship." in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, 1991, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2nd Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Lynch, Bernadette. "Museums Tied Up in Knots: The Disabling Effect of Public Engagement Museums," *Practicing Anthropology*, 2015, 37 (3): 58-59.

<sup>4</sup> Welsh, "Re-Configuring Museums," *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 2005, 20 (2).



Figure 1. *Reclamation* Photography Exhibit at New Museum  
Los Gatos  
Source: (NUMU Los Gatos, 2022)

18th century.<sup>5</sup> Their federal recognition was removed after 1927 due to neglectful practice, despite providing lineages as evidence according to the guidelines, it has not been restored. This injustice is one of the reasons why *Reclamation* was exhibited the way it was, which will be discussed throughout the text.

By understanding curatorial practices regarding exhibition design and how collaboration with other departments and specialists can fill gaps missed by a narrow perspective, I hope to show readers that cultural exhibitions can and should employ modern practices and ideas of authenticity for proper representation. Suppose museums employ these strategies and move away from essentializing cultures. In that case, they can take steps towards confronting their roots in racism and classism to reconceptualize the museum as a place for action and meaning-making instead of just an authoritative house of knowledge. Before showing how NUMU Los Gatos takes strides in its exhibition, there are two tools I intend to use to explain its significance.

#### Tools for Decolonizing the Exhibit and Curatorial Practice

Curatorial power and where we focus efforts for interpretation reflects what kind of museum the exhibit lives in; a traditional or inclusive/active museum. When museums make cultural exhibits they are in control of representing a community,

<sup>5</sup> Home Page, Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area, 2022.

and decide whether certain people hold more significance in the cultural canon.<sup>6</sup> Museums fail to become places of social change, as they claim to be, because their exhibits maintain a status quo of display that essentializes non-white cultures. This way of exhibiting treats them as unchanging when no one characteristic can ever represent an entire culture. Museums should exercise caution against placing hasty generalizations on objects, especially when their exhibits are meant to reflect the diversity and nuances that make up the human experience. Relinquishing control allows museum curators to take advantage of objects' ever-changing symbolism to create thought-provoking displays.<sup>7</sup> Objects can have meanings in two ways: they are defined by their function and by how they serve as symbols to people. This method of analysis is called symbolic mediation, used by anthropologists to extract multiple meanings from objects and to uncover how these symbolic meanings become tethered to something inanimate.<sup>8</sup> So long as curators prioritize their audiences and let them have agency to interpret via symbolic mediation, they are taking the first step in rejecting what the traditional museum stands for.

Decolonization at its core is unraveling and undoing the effects of colonialism, whether that means physically removing colonial forces or refocusing the dominant culture away from a colonial mindset. For Colantoni, decolonization in practice means working closely with the people connected to the artworks and objects because that ensures the presentation and interpretation are “accurate, equitable,” and authentic.<sup>9</sup> Collaborating decentralizes the museum's authority by centering unheard voices in the dominant culture and counting their stories as authentic, “[incorporating] the potential for a multiplicity of interpretations—some conflicting and some contentious.”<sup>10</sup> Instead of this power shift weakening the museum, affirmation from an institution with cultural authority strengthens its purpose in society by creating better thinkers who can commit to transformative action. Unsurprisingly, decolonization requires a lot of introspection and internal changes on the part of institutions like the museum.

One way to view decolonization is through steps – five to be exact, as outlined by Hawaiian scholar Pōkā Laenui. This is “more of a social process than political,” but decolonization can become a political force because when people

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<sup>6</sup> Duncan, “Art Museums and the Rituals of Citizenship” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*.

<sup>7</sup> Karp, Ivan, and Kratz, Corinne A., “Collecting, Exhibiting, and Interpreting: Museums as Mediators and Midwives of Meaning,” *Museum Anthropology*, 2014, 37 (1).

<sup>8</sup> Karp and Kratz, “Collecting, Exhibiting, and Interpreting...”

<sup>9</sup> Colantoni, Cristiano, Director of Exhibitions and Collections at New Museum Los Gatos (NUMU Los Gatos), in discussion with the director, interviewed by Caitlin Pambid, Zoom Web Conferencing, 2023. 25:09.

<sup>10</sup> Welsh, “Re-Configuring Museums.”

change, the governance over them changes too.<sup>11</sup> The five steps are: Rediscovery and Recovery, Mourning, Dreaming, Commitment, and Action. Rediscovery and Recovery is recovering feelings of pride for one's ethnic culture, and showing it in ways that are not tokenized. Mourning is the step for healing and "lamenting victimization." It can be a chance to become more committed to Rediscovery and Recovery, but also a time for some to wallow in anger over colonization; "stuck in the 'awfulizing' of their victimhood."<sup>12</sup> While that anger is valid, it fails to move on and dream of a future where the effects of colonization are undone. Dreaming is when decolonization can take shape and go beyond putting BIPOC in positions of power for oppressive systems.<sup>13</sup> This step gives colonized people the time to reimagine structures and how they would develop.<sup>14</sup> Commitment is shown through dedication and a consensus, and it is only after that step can proactive Action take place.<sup>15</sup> Whether that action takes the form of taking up arms, using the media or organizing depends on the situation.<sup>16</sup> This five-step model is relevant to decolonizing the museum because it voices what the museum field means when we say decolonize the museum – recognizing and dethroning Western thought as the prevailing narrative in exhibitions, and reimagining the museum to become a more inclusive space. That message becomes more impactful when the visitor and cultural bearers are active in that process.

In addition to Laenui's Processes of Decolonization, the Dimensions of Curation Competing Values Exhibition Model can also help steer curatorial intent. This model maps how curatorial values shape an exhibit and can visualize where it succeeds and what could be improved. Decolonization strategies vary depending on the type of exhibition, and often it is a learning process. The x-axis is interpretive focus; object versus audience and refers to whether we are presenting objects with the visitor's understanding in mind. The y-axis is curatorial power; lone creator versus collaborative effort. The 3-dimensional z-axis is curatorial intent; democratization of culture versus cultural democracy, which refers to whether the exhibit spreads information widely or makes visitors active users of the space. Aside from white culture being democratized the most across Western museums, democratizing culture is the bare minimum of what should be expected to do when nowadays they align themselves with the public and creating social good. Part of what needs to die in museum practice is alienating visitors by treating them as information sponges. The 4 museum quadrants created by interpretive focus and curatorial power (x & y axis) are the traditional, exclusive, sympathetic, and

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<sup>11</sup> Laenui, Pōkā, "Processes of decolonization," *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Laenui, "Processes of decolonization."

<sup>13</sup> Laenui, "Processes of decolonization."

<sup>14</sup> Laenui, "Processes of decolonization."

<sup>15</sup> Laenui, "Processes of decolonization."

<sup>16</sup> Laenui, "Processes of decolonization."

inclusive museum. I am focusing on the two extremes, traditional and inclusive museums, and I may interchangeably use the term active to refer to the inclusive museum. This is because that style of museum is active in its community by being grassroots-based, considering the visitor, and collaborating with cultural knowledge bearers.<sup>17</sup>

In shorthand, the traditional museum is associated with colonization, essentialism, Freire's<sup>18</sup> banking form of education, and his necrophily metaphor. Under the model, traditional museums focus interpretation on the object, curatorial

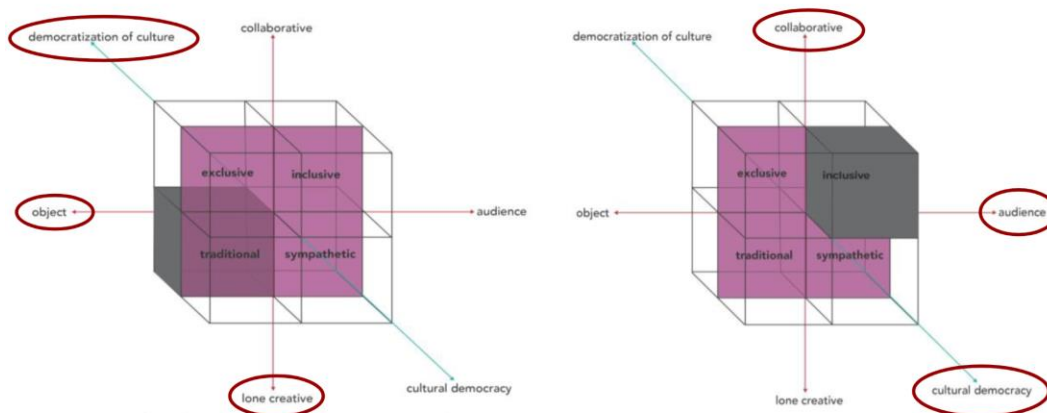


Figure 2. (left) Traditional Museum and (right) Inclusive/Active Placement of Dimensions of Curation Competing Values Exhibition Model. Source: (Villeneuve, et. al., 2021).

power comes from a lone creator, and curatorial intent lies in the democratization of culture, or “top-down” dissemination of information.<sup>19</sup> The inclusive/active museum is associated with decolonization, constructivism, Freire's<sup>20</sup> problem-posing form of education, and his biophily metaphor. Under the model, inclusive museums focus interpretation on the audience, curatorial power comes from collaboration, and curatorial intent lies in a cultural democracy.<sup>21</sup> I apply this model to NUMU Los Gatos's exhibit, *Reclamation: Resilience of the Muwekma Ohlone*

<sup>17</sup> Villeneuve, et. al., “Dimensions of Curation Competing Values Exhibition Model: Toward Intentional Curation.”

<sup>18</sup> Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 2018, Bloomsbury Academic, 4th edition.

<sup>19</sup> Villeneuve, et. al., “Dimensions of Curation Competing Values Exhibition Model: Toward Intentional Curation.”

<sup>20</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>21</sup> Villeneuve, et. al., “Dimensions of Curation Competing Values Exhibition Model: Toward Intentional Curation.”

*Tribe* because it best shows how an active museum would operate in terms of curatorial practices.

### Decolonization - *Reclamation: Resilience of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe*

New Museum Los Gatos (NUMU Los Gatos) has had a long relationship with the Muwekma Ohlone, an indigenous tribe local to the Bay Area. Their most recent exhibition entitled *Reclamation: Resilience of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe*, is unique from other Native American exhibits because NUMU Los Gatos handed full curatorial power to members of the Muwekma, allowing them to decide the focus of the exhibit – how the Muwekma Ohlone are still here instead of treating their culture as relics from the past.

*Reclamation* shows the Muwekma as a living part of the Bay Area by having a physical photo exhibition in NUMU Los Gatos and an accompanying online StoryMap of important heritage sites around the Bay Area. Photographer Kike Arnal worked with the Muwekma to create vibrant stills of their dance, cultural events, and tribe members' daily lives. The on-site exhibit had QR codes that would take people to action items. The idea was that once visitors learned about the tribe and their need to regain federal recognition, they would help that effort through donations sent to the tribe or by sending a pre-templated letter to email to their respective congressperson. These types of interactive aspects of the exhibit help visitors engage, and Colantoni pointed out that “curatorially, that was a really important aspect, is that engagement piece and the call to action.”<sup>22</sup> Contrary to the traditional museum paradigm, the curator's voice is not paramount, and relinquishing control does not discredit or weaken the museum's position in society.

On the Dimensions of Curation Competing Values Exhibition Model, this exhibition falls under the inclusive quadrant (x-axis: audience, y-axis: collaborative), and leans more towards cultural democracy for the 3-dimensional z-axis.<sup>23</sup> Its exhibit components meet the audience where they are at in their knowledge of the Muwekma Ohlone, the curating team at NUMU Los Gatos collaborated with the tribe through the entire process, and the exhibit is “made for social impact, working with cultural knowledge bearers, and being based in the community.”<sup>24</sup> *Reclamation* and NUMU Los Gatos complete all five steps of Laenui's Processes of Decolonization: Rediscovery and Recovery, Mourning,

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<sup>22</sup> Colantoni, Cristiano, in discussion with the director, 10:22.

<sup>23</sup> Villeneuve, et. al., “Dimensions of Curation Competing Values Exhibition Model: Toward Intentional Curation.”

<sup>24</sup> Villeneuve, et. al., “Dimensions of Curation Competing Values Exhibition Model: Toward Intentional Curation.”



Dreaming, Commitment, and Action.<sup>25</sup> Visitors can rediscover the Muwekma and their history. The tribe is given time to lament their loss of federal recognition by the government's carelessness, along with other grievances, but can regroup and dream of a better future with the feelings of life and hope these photos and public art sites radiate. In collaboration with the Muwekma, NUMU Los Gatos commits to serving as a platform for the tribe, and action is taken in the form of QR codes for audiences to reach out to their congressman and donate to the tribe.

Museum exhibits serve as contact points between the audience and the object, two groups that may never otherwise meet. Becoming inspired by visiting a museum has stayed the same, but that inspiration could be best instilled by bringing

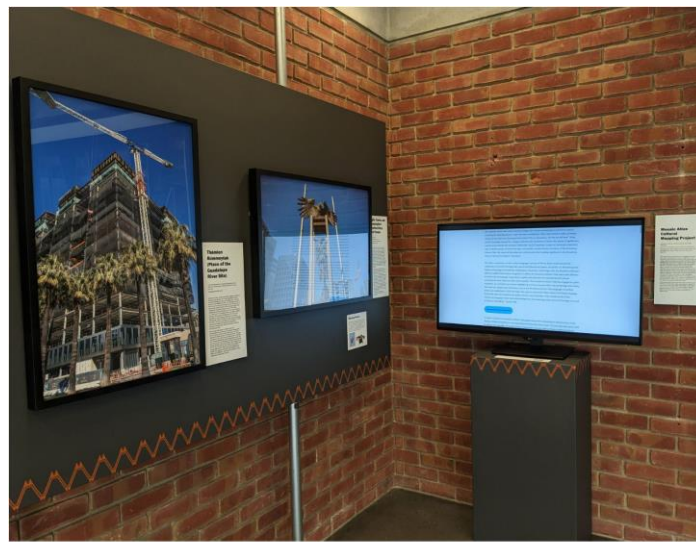


Figure 3.1 *Reclamation Photography Exhibit and StoryMap* at  
New Museum Los Gatos  
Source: (NUMU Los Gatos, 2022)

the visitor in on the action. Through the QR codes, NUMU Los Gatos invites visitors to take part in changes that will have effect once they leave the museum. This pierces through the introspective bubble the museum environment has historically created, fundamentally expanding the role of visitors. In our increasingly diverse reality, museums have the opportunity to be a place where visitors can look beyond themselves and become activists.

Making the museum space welcoming for everyone leads to a conversation about equity, something that can only be truly achieved by decolonizing. Christina Kreps, clarifies that “methods that are ‘seen as appropriate’ or ‘best practice’ in one context may not be in another, and should be adapted to locality’s culture and

<sup>25</sup> Laenui, “Processes of decolonization.”

socioeconomic status.”<sup>26</sup> NUMU Los Gatos took this advice to heart and hung back while the Muwekma took center stage in terms of finding exhibition content. Colantoni mentions as much when talking about *Reclamation* and the museum’s vision and equity statements:

And back to the equity piece, it was important for us, for this project in particular, and the future projects that we will be partnering with the Muwekma on is that we're here to provide guidance and provide platform and provide the venue for them to tell the stories that they wanted to tell. People see museums, well maybe they do, as these very lofty academic spaces and, you know, staffed with experts in their field. Curators who would hopefully work with the people that they're making the exhibition about, but really, consciously or unconsciously, those biases would creep out. So with the *Reclamation* exhibitions, it was important to us to share the Muwekma story authentically, and through their own voice.<sup>27</sup>

Since NUMU Los Gatos ceded control to the Muwekma, *Reclamation* focused on the revitalization of the tribe. With revitalizing being the operative word, this kind of exhibition struck me as a way for curators to decolonize. A top-down dissemination of knowledge robs people of agency, and the only way to undermine this authority over public knowledge is to share more agency. In Colantoni’s words, NUMU Los Gatos’ collaborators challenged this banking form of museum education and used contemporary photography to help visitors engage and relate:

Alan [Alan Leventhal, the Muwekma’s ethnohistorian] presented a proposal that would later turn out to be the second part of the *Reclamation* exhibit that focused on land and public art. And it was there that he suggested that the main medium would be photography of these places. But as our conversations and our work with them continued and evolved, the tribe was really interested in not only presenting the story of sites of significance to the tribe, historically and presently, but also started talking about the other aspects of the tribe's revitalization. Like I said before the dances, the language, cultures, and heritage, so that's how the other parts of the *Reclamation* exhibits evolved. And that became our main focus, because those are the stories that the tribe wanted to focus on. We thought

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<sup>26</sup> Kreps, Christina, “Museum Anthropology as Applied Anthropology: Engaged Scholarship and Practice,” *Practicing Anthropology*, 2015, 37 (3): 57.

<sup>27</sup> Colantoni, Cristiano, in discussion with the director, 5:57.

photography would be the best medium, the most engaging and relatable medium.<sup>28</sup>

*Reclamation* applies to the local community, especially because of NUMU Los Gatos' location. Los Gatos and the rest of the South Bay have transformed from the boom in technology industries, and the voices of these implant residents are heard over the first people, the Muwekma Ohlone. This relates to the biological metaphors of necrophily and biophily Freire uses when discussing banking versus problem-posing education forms. Necrophily and the banking form of education go hand in hand because both are related to oppression and turning people into lifeless,



Figure 3.2 *Reclamation* Photography Exhibit at New Museum Los Gatos  
Source: (NUMU Los Gatos, 2022)

inanimate objects.<sup>29</sup> Treating people as lifeless makes it easier for the banking form of education's top-down, receiving model to function. In the case of exhibitions, the process of turning the people being exhibited into inanimate objects is already completed – the objects displayed represent “what once was.” Presenting objects and art in the past tense treats them as part of a dying culture, making it easier for the traditional museum to essentialize because it does not leave room for oppositional questioning. Conversely, biophily and the problem-posing form of education go together because in treating culture and its objects as alive, there is

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<sup>28</sup> Colantoni, Cristiano, in discussion with the director, 7:48.

<sup>29</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

more urgency for calls to transformative action to ensure they stay present.<sup>30</sup> *Reclamation* relates to biophily because revitalizing means imbuing something with new life. Instead of the Muwekma being shown as frozen in time by displaying artifacts, they are revitalized in the public eye by being shown as active both from the photos and the interactive map of public art and heritage sites. Visitors too are brought to life by participating in the exhibit with the aforementioned action items. If it was not clear before, the traditional museum's way of exhibiting is oppressive for non-white cultures because of the way it essentializes and seeks to control the narrative. It is unnatural for us to view cultures as unchanging, and it is ironic considering that culture is supposed to be a part of life, something that constantly fluctuates.

This exhibit's move to decolonize raises a question – where does authenticity come from, and how is something inauthentic? When authenticity inevitably enters the conversation about culture, it is not as simple as complaining that the dominant history is being retconned as a lie. The fight led by marginalized communities for representation comes off as harsh because to let go of any amount of dominance is unfathomable. Colantoni says as much when discussing how NUMU Los Gatos goes about untold stories, not rejecting but looking outside the narrative written by white settlers, “because the history books were written by people just like them. And they didn't see outside of their own bubble.”<sup>31</sup> The traditional museum's practices are misguided in scope by only looking at their objects through dominant white historical lenses. Curators have the necessary analysis and synthesis abilities to harness their collaborator's knowledge into something even more powerful – narrative. Stories can pique people's interest, inspire them, and allow them to empathize and provide aid. But the power of that narrative is dependent on the knowledge available to make such interpretations.<sup>32</sup> This is where cultural knowledge bearers or other professionals can come in to ensure that, as Colantoni says, museums look outside their bubble.

Decolonization work is important for museums because it is a matter of accuracy and excellence. To maintain the high standard that museums claim to have, there needs to be integrity in what we teach and exhibit.<sup>33</sup> A major characteristic of an exhibition aiming for cultural democracy is that the curator keeps in mind the “assumption of multiple cultural views and presence of within-

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<sup>30</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>31</sup> Colantoni, Cristiano, in discussion with the director, 32:29.

<sup>32</sup> Crew, Spencer R. and Sims, James E., ed. by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, “Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, 1991, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2nd Edition.

<sup>33</sup> Colantoni, Cristiano, in discussion with the director, 43:32.

culture experts.”<sup>34</sup> If there are narratives left out, that information is “incomplete or inaccurate,” even inauthentic.<sup>35</sup> There needs to be a paradigm shift that incorporates decolonization as practice, not just a temporary experiment.

This exhibit’s success in decolonizing curatorial practices can inform the repatriation process. Repatriation is a process of returning objects and human remains from a collection to their rightful owners once clear evidence is presented. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) reserves repatriation for federally recognized tribes, meaning these tribes are recognized as a political entity by the government. CalNAGPRA is the state’s way of bypassing and including unrecognized tribes, like the Muwekma, but federal law takes precedence. Repatriation is a direct way the museum can confront its racist roots but the effort overall has been a slow crawl, the CSU system being no exception. After 20 years since NAGPRA was passed, only 9% of the artifacts and remains held in collections across 23 campuses have been returned, and half of these campuses have failed to complete an inventory check that was supposed to be done in 1995.<sup>36</sup> Campus collections are used for teaching and research and can be on loan for exhibits, so they function similarly to the museum in that both are repositories of cultural objects. While lack of funding and trained staff are the cited issues, there is another reason the CSU system and institutions struggle to fulfill their duty. The big picture issue of repatriation is that institutions need to be stewards, not owners, of their collection, and do away with believing that they are the only ones capable of using or protecting an object in premier ways.

NUMU Los Gatos and CSU Long Beach have created a template for successful, open collaboration between institutions like academia or museums and indigenous groups. CSU Long Beach is leading the repatriation effort, with 275 ancestral remains and 6,059 cultural items returned to 3 local tribes since 1990.<sup>37</sup> The anthropology department has produced a team that understands the field’s contemporary role. The staff’s proactiveness has led to a positive relationship with the local tribes and the ancestral tribal lands the university occupies. With full curatorial power, the Muwekma focused the exhibit on contemporary perspectives instead of the anthropological past. This informs the repatriation process because it is more than just fulfilling a legal duty and being dogged about primary sources; these artifacts are people’s ancestries being held against their will. For either institution, establishing a relationship, having hard conversations about past afflictions, and trusting that they have each other’s best interests in mind are the

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<sup>34</sup> Villeneuve, et. al., “Dimensions of Curation Competing Values Exhibition Model: Toward Intentional Curation.”

<sup>35</sup> Colantoni, Cristiano, in discussion with the director, 43:22.

<sup>36</sup> Wu, Amelia and San Roque, Helena, “California is pressing universities to repatriate thousands of Native American remains and artifacts. How two campuses are succeeding,” Cal Matters, 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Wu and San Roque, “California is pressing universities to repatriate...”

foundations for these positive outcomes. This approach challenges critics of repatriation who argue that the process would mean pulling entire collections, resulting in a missed opportunity to teach others about Native American history. *Reclamation* especially refutes the idea that native tribes are uninterested in anthropological and scientific research when in reality, they want to be involved stakeholders but are shut out. Curators should allocate their efforts towards thinking about the symbolic weight objects hold in the context of colonization. Collaboration and knowing how to be a steward instead of an owner is the best way forward for repatriating objects and remains in a dignified way.

## Conclusion

Instead of focusing on the decolonization of museums in terms of their collection and archive practices or recruiting and hiring processes, I chose exhibitions. Exhibitions are where the public contacts museums, so by proxy, visitors can partake in museum discourse. Spotlighting ways to change how museums exhibit can inspire museumgoers to learn more about the inner workings of museums they enjoy, in hopes that these discoveries encourage support for organizations and museum professionals fighting for change. By looking at NUMU Los Gatos, it is clear that museums of all types, not just major ones, still serve an important role in society. But it is also more apparent that there needs to be major changes if they want to stay relevant. Employing decolonization strategies such as decentralizing the museum voice, focusing on audience reception, and collaborating with cultural experts, can change public outlook on the museum into something more hopeful and transformative. Accepting that there are multiple cultural perspectives is the first step this institution can take in confronting its roots in racism and classism.

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