

- Deborah Thomas: [00:00](#) Hello, my name is Deborah Thomas, editor-in-chief of American Anthropologist, and this is Anthropological Airwaves.
- Deborah Thomas: [00:15](#) Welcome back to this two part special feature on decolonizing museums, which was recorded at the Museum Ethnographers Group conference April 12th and 13th at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, United Kingdom. In the first episode, we heard about practitioners challenges with decolonizing ethnographic museums. In this episode, stories and objects we will hear from JC Niala about her encounter with a photograph of her grandfather that had been on display in an exhibit at the Goethe Institute in Nairobi. Niala draws our attention to indigenous perspectives on exhibition and return, a topic also addressed by Laura Peers, curator for the Americas at the Pitt rivers museum. Peers discusses a number of other repatriation projects in which she has been involved.
- Gingee: [01:12](#) "Decolonize your mind reclaim your expression, start your own struggles. Find out the intersections, dismantle your oppression, then enter a new dimension so we can be free"
- Inside the PRM: [01:20](#) "So when visitors come into the museum, I think the main reaction is one of awe and wonderment at this amazing space full upon row upon row of objects around the world, waiting to greet you. Not everyone likes their histories and if we don't have a history with about someone and sometimes the things they've made is the only kind of document of their lives, really. So, the information locked up in these objects is really, really important to understanding the world, which is kind of what these museums are all about.
- JC Niala: [01:53](#) [Conference Talk] Good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to come and listen to my work in progress paper, right at the end of what has been an enriching and fascinating conference. My name is JC Niala, and I'm reading for a Master's in Social Anthropology at Saint Anthony's College, University of Oxford. I'm also a storyteller by profession and increasingly specialized and bringing to life stories from history using museum collections. One night in 2013, I was living in Nairobi at the time. I was woken up by a phone call from a longstanding family friend who excitedly told me that she had just seen my grandfather, given that he had passed away four years before I was born, you can imagine I got up rather quickly once she had actually seen, was this. This is a photograph of my late grandfather, Musungu Jeremiah Awori and his wife Mariamu Awori, with seven of their 17 children taken in their family home compound near the Kenya-Uganda border.

JC Niala: [02:54](#) This photograph was part of an exhibition featuring families, but it was framed, had helped to shape Kenyan history. 2013 was the year that Kenya celebrated 50 years of independence. I knew I had to find out where my friend had seen this photograph and get there as soon as I could. It was possible. I would never see it at all. The exhibition took place at Goethe Institute in Nairobi alone with Alliance Francaise. Both institutions receive a lot of funding from their respective German and French governments, primarily to teach German and French and both with explicit missions to bring together people and foster relationships. In reality, the Goethe Institute and the Alliance Francaise are cultural hotspots in Nairobi. They hold regular art and history exhibitions, film screenings and festivals, music concerts, and political debates. In many ways, they function and are recognized by Nairobians as museum spaces. They're also well known for hosting events, that are considered too politically sensitive by the national museums of Kenya.

JC Niala: [03:59](#) This slide shows the outside of the Goethe Institute at the top and one of their project teams, as well as a recent headline about three well known contemporary Kenyan artists whose works were banned from the Nairobi National Museum, but have all been exhibited either at the Goethe Institute or Alliance Francaise. The reason that Alliance Francaise and the Goethe institute are able to do this is because they sit in a liminal space. They're funded by foreign governments and although they work very closely with Kenyans, the people that run on are essentially responsible for their programs are usually experts in Kenya on three to five year contracts with specialist curators brought in from time to time -- I think you can see that from the photograph of this particular project team. Back in 2013, I knew that if I did not get to the exhibition while it was still going on, the likelihood of being able to trace the photo would be next to nil.

JC Niala: [04:53](#) As it turned out, when I went to the Goethe institute the morning after my friend had called me, it was the last day of the exhibition. I found myself confronted with a young German woman who eventually gave my partner permission to return the following day to take a photo of the photo, the one I showed you just a moment ago, as a volunteer who had come to spend some time helping out in Africa. She was unable to answer any of the questions I had, which all pertained to my getting future access to the photograph. As it stands, I have never seen the original photograph again. I share the story with you because I believe that it highlights many of the issues facing source communities, curators and institutions, as they all come

together. To use a quote from Dr. Mbugua Wa Mungai, in an article that he wrote for the Goethe Institute in 2015, I believe that the encounter I had represents both continuities with and breaks from colonialism.

JC Niala: [05:50](#) Without digressing too much, these pictures illustrate one of the key challenges that source communities cite that's an access on the concomitant opportunity to be able to shape the ways in which materials are presented and interpreted. Together, the Kenyan National Archives and the Nairobi National Museum are a huge repository for Kenyan history, that are still negotiating that colonial legacy. The Kenya National Archives, which you can see over there on the left, have been described as a living example of historical and ethnographic knowledge, with history and it's very space and structure. Certainly, it's collections structure and clientele highlight the gaps between aspiration and achievement. A gap that I think those working to be colonized museum spaces and practices can relate to.

JC Niala: [06:40](#) Whilst the Kenyan National Archives is completely open to the public, the building itself originally having been a bank is imposing, and distinctly colonial in the way in which it has to be navigated as I think you can see from the picture here. many source communities in Kenya find the building intimidating and if it were not for the enthusiastic staff who bend over backwards to include clientele ranging from those who might not be able to read and write in English to students who are PhD candidates, many source communities would not engage with it at all. This is in direct contrast to the Nairobi National Museum, which you can see there on the right, which when it was renovated, took into consideration contemporary Kenyan culture and created an open entrance from a veranda like space, which is regularly busy with people eating, relaxing and socializing. Access begins with the experience that our source community member has on approaching an institution that has a complex and problematic history. The way in which a source community member has to enter into a museum space, whether physically or increasingly online can set the tone for the interaction.

JC Niala: [07:50](#) Given the time that I have, I will mention just three points with regards to opportunities and limitation when it comes to decolonizing the museum. With lessons I learned from the experience I had with the photograph and the ways in which I continue to work with it. One, sharing authority and governance. All of the families featured in the exhibition would have had living members. To my knowledge, none of them were consulted or informed about the use of the photographs in the

exhibition. The only call that my family received about the photo was from our friend. This is a direct colonial legacy. The power is symmetry between those governing and those being governed is one which continues to be played out in museum settings in Kenya. This is a picture of a sample Kenyan identity card on the right side. It's historical predecessor, adult males in Kenya and colonial times could be arrested for not having one on their person at all times post-independence.

JC Niala:

[08:48](#)

This has not changed. It is a controversial document that was introduced by the British colonial government and was opposed by many who resisted colonialism, devised an instrument of control. It is not possible to access most of the collections in the Kenyan national archives without one -- yet because of government channel donor funding, curators from countries like Germany can have access to these same collections and put together an exhibition that was part of a wider celebration of Kenyan independence -- I'm sure that the irony is not lost on you. I mentioned this because there are many projects that bring together those who work in museums in Europe with their counterparts in Kenya and other former colonies. I'm interested to know before a well-meaning curator embarks upon a well-intentioned projects to capacity build or for other purposes how much they're aware of the intricacies of the situation that they're stepping into power structures that can be as invisible as they are strongly experienced situations that may be continuities of rather than breaks from colonialism to collaboration.

JC Niala:

[09:59](#)

The following, the presentations that took place yesterday, I would now call this point joint intellectual work; I'm incredibly grateful for what I've been learning in this conference. The fact that we as a family, we're not consulted meant that a huge opportunity for joint intellectual work was lost. A critique of collections in museums that were collected, arranged by colonizers is that that they regularly flattened history, take materials out of context and place them in a freeze frame that does not afford the materials, the complexity that it deserves, which brings me to my final point. Simply put, privileging the indigenous perspective opens up the narrative. This brings me back to the original photo in question, which is also the reason why I'm standing here talking to you today. The reason that this photo would have been included and will likely to continue to be used unless the decolonization process and Kenyan museums continues to gather space.

JC Niala:

[10:55](#)

Pace is because of the missionary work that my grandfather was involved in in Kenya and also in Uganda. He was a driving force

for the translation of the Bible into indigenous languages, which was actually considered radical at the time. The little boy standing between his brother and sister on the right, W.W.W. Awori, went on to become one of the first five parliamentarians and the soon to be independent Kenya. And the young boy Moody Awori, leaning on his nanny on the left was a future vice president of Kenya, but that's only part of the story. This one photo could actually be used in many different ways and to open up different conversations in east African history that still need further exploring today. Allow me to elucidate the presence of the nanny and the photo when coupled with a classic traditional Samia lullaby that goes "O mwana lira, o mwana lira, o mwana lira, mulesi o mwana," which when translated means: "the baby is crying, where is the nanny?" speaks to a history of domestic service that is still a prominent issue in Kenya today. The roof speaks to a history of material culture and architectural styles, some of which are currently trying to be revived and this photograph might give clues to those who would like to work with it. And an anthropologist who recently looked at this photograph pointed out to me that there's a whole discussion around the history of adoption of Western clothing that this photo could be a part of. But for me, fascinated by multi-species ethnography, and the role of indigenous Kenyans in ecological and wildlife conservation -- what never fails to catch my eye in this photo is the crested crane in the bottom left hand corner. Current debates on sustainable wildlife conservation are regularly discussed or lens of well-known foreign conservationists who are seen as somehow responsible for saving African wildlife.

JC Niala:

[12:50](#)

My great-grandfather was a hunter and a trader, a respectable profession in the mid-to-late 1800s, but in the ways that children often rebel against their parents. My grandfather had an animal orphanage and rescued and rehabilitated many animals. The crested crane in the photograph, was just one of them. This photo which was seen as representing one aspect of Kenyan history and will likely be rolled out to the 75th or 100th independence celebration, actually holds so much more. I'm sure that there are many others like it, and yet, without decolonization in museum practices, these stories and the possibilities of a deeper understanding of histories captured within them simply disappear. Thank you. [Applause]

Chris Green:

[14:32](#)

Hello and welcome. I'm Chris Green. I'm here with Dr. Laura Peers, Professor of Museum Anthropology and Curator for the Americas collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. So Dr. Peers, you had a very interesting talk about decolonization at the Pitt Rivers Museum and working with the Haida Gwaii. I

thought one of the really interesting points that you mentioned very briefly at the outset was this critique of the word decolonization. Could you say a little bit more about what? What is problematic about that term in the museum context or just generally?

Laura Peers: [15:05](#)

I think the term decolonization has been overused in some ways. It's used as a buzzword. I think it repackages all of the issues that we've all been wrestling with for at least 30 years. Issues of power agency, voice and representation within the ethnographic museum and in my part of that world, that involves the presence and active involvement of indigenous peoples in the museum. So I think it's always good to revisit these issues. They're going to be with us always. However, I do think that the word is a word of power in places like Oxford that our centers of the former empire where the collections in one way or another, mostly not all, but mostly came here through imperial processes, but I think we've also normalized issue that colonization within our practice here in the UK. And so thinking about decolonization is actually a really good way to begin thinking into those issues as they have congealed and become normal practice within Britain.

Chris Green: [16:18](#)

One of the interesting kind of applications of sort of a decolonized museology that came through in your talk was looking at the databases in particular. I was hoping that you could kind of talk about how that's looked at Pitt Rivers Museum.

Laura Peers: [16:31](#)

Well, when we're thinking about museum databases, I think especially in the UK, we need to remember that this is a relatively new version of an older problem of classification and information management that goes right back to the books and the records that are generated when an object comes to the museum. And in a place like Oxford, where the museums have been receiving collections for three centuries. So you get a lot of completely outdated and pejorative terms in the records, and then people decided to computerize and to make records more accessible to put them online. And so we have these caveats that we have on the website. For instance, when we put our database online that says please be aware that there's historical terminology in here, but I think that doesn't go far enough to understanding how people respond when they see those terms, if they're coming from a community of origin perspective, we still haven't taken on board the fact that many cultures have their own words for things, whether they're an English or in the language of origin and their own ways of classifying and thinking

about things that are by no means accounted for in museum databases anywhere in the world.

Laura Peers:

[17:45](#)

Right? So all museum databases are essentially Western classificatory schema that is core to the scientific and enlightenment project. That's not how indigenous peoples think of the world at all. So if we're going to decolonize, maybe we could think about changing the fields, about thinking about the ways that we classify and segregate certain categories of objects. About the ways we make information available or not available to people because there's a lot that's not on the database. It's great that we've got this material in a computerized format, it's fantastic that it's online because it's so much more accessible to people globally now, but I think that in itself triggers a whole new wave of problems that we need to deal with if we are going to decolonize museums.

Chris Green:

[18:35](#)

I think one of the things that you brought up in that response speaks to the broader issues of decolonization in the museum, of access, seems to be that your relationships with the folks at Haida Gwaii have really changed both the ways that the museum relates to indigenous peoples, but also the way that the indigenous peoples relate to the museum and the way that they interact with the museum. Could you talk a little bit about how the terms of access, or the types of access, for indigenous peoples to their own cultural materials in the museum have changed via these relationships that you have.

Laura Peers:

[19:15](#)

So when I arrived at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Nineteen Ninety Eight, I had to work with lots of indigenous communities in North America and I knew that they were working with historic material culture to strengthen cultural knowledge and practices to engage in postcolonial healing. And on my first day here I looked over the balcony into the main corridor, the Pitt Rivers museum, which looks very Victorian and we have this very dense Victorian display of objects, that's probably 300,000 objects on display that you can actually see from this point in the museum. And I thought of all this material that's here, and all the people who aren't, you know, and I just have this incredible gulf and thought, well there's no point just being a historian or an anthropologist or a kind of ordinary curator. I've got to do something else altogether, which is simply to build bridges -- and they're going to be very long bridges because there's a whole ocean and much of a continent in between us. But if you need access to your material heritage, essentially for cultural survival, which is true for indigenous peoples at many levels, whether as a reclamation of knowledge about ontology and worldview relationships with humans and other than

human beings or whether it's to deploy symbols of identity for political struggles, indigenous peoples really need access to this heritage. And so it seemed to me that this was kind of an emergency and I needed to take that onboard and my curatorial practice.

Laura Peers:

[20:41](#)

So I made it my business to simply go to communities and say, look, this material is in Oxford. In some cases, this material has been at Oxford for centuries. Where do we start? Like there's been no dialogue as far as I can tell before I arrived and began bringing delegations to Oxford. The last indigenous person from North America who came here was Mungo Martin in 1958. So I simply began contacting communities through my existing networks and friends of friends and friends of Friends of friends and saying, look, this material is here. I think it's from your community or your region. The university is not willing to consider repatriation yet, that they're just not ready for that, but we have to start a dialogue or nothing's going to happen and I want you to know that it's here and I want you to have some kind of access so you tell me what kind of access is meaningful and then we'll figure out how to do that. I sent lots and lots of letters and emails and copies of photographs. I went out and the cases and photograph stuff myself because most of the collection was not actually photograph and just kept sending it out and sending it and sending it.

Laura Peers:

[21:41](#)

And then I started having graduate students and for their doctoral and postdoctoral projects, we would pick a collection and they would develop relationships with a particular community and then we would do some form of repatriation, whether it was visual repatriation or ritual repatriation or knowledge repatriation. Um, and so we brought delegations here, over the years, many individual artists, many, many individual artists, but also larger and larger delegation. And I began to realize that there's this phenomenon for overseas museums, that's the three day visit, so if you're coming from another continent, you scraped together the money for the airfare and for a week or so in Britain, and as students, you know how difficult that would be, right? And we've had artists who showed up here who'd sold their work to pay for the trip, and so they come here, they work with our collections and they might go to another couple of museums in the UK and then their time and money runs out and they go home, but their need for access to these collections doesn't end.

Laura Peers:

[22:41](#)

And museums in the UK have a need for assistance in interpretation and stewardship of those materials. That doesn't end. And so we needed to get past the three or four day visit.

And we'd done some of that with visual repatriation. So like a collection of photographs back to the Kainai Reserve, the Blood Reserve in southern Alberta and worked with them and gave them all the jpegs and scans, that sort of thing. And then we got a grant to work with the Haida nation and I'd been going back and forth with the Haida over about five years. They knew that a very important collection was here and on one of my visits to Haida Gwaii, the Haida Repatriation Committee hosted me for a supper and we were just kind of tossing ideas around after the supper and somebody said, wouldn't it be great if we could all come and visit the collections at Oxford?

Laura Peers:

[23:30](#)

And I said, wow, that would be amazing, wouldn't it? And then we all kind of looked at each other and thought, okay, that's it. We need the big visit with capitals. So then we cast around for money? And the Leverhulme Trust had this amazing network grant that was supposed to be for academics bringing together academics from different continents. And so we argued that indigenous culture bearers are equivalent to academic scholars for the purpose of this work. And that was the first time this argument had been made. This was in 2008, 2009. And so we got that money and then the Haidas fundraised on their own hook and matched it. And then in September 2009, we hosted 21 members of the Haida nation and we deliberately brought out all 301 Haida objects from the collection, which we had over the previous six months condition checked, stabilized where necessary in conservation, and worked up the catalog records for and photographed.

Laura Peers:

[24:30](#)

So this was working on the collections that would never otherwise have been done. These, I want to say these visits, benefit collections hugely. Whereas the money in their visit is a huge trigger. I will not put objects on the table in front of elders if they're covered in coal dust. So which historic collections are they were in environments that were heated by coal. You don't want to be putting objects in front of elders that have historic insect carcasses on them, which is the reality for very old collections. So you, you've got to do the prep and you've got to do the photography. So it's actually great for museums to do these visits. And just purely housekeeping, museological ways that visit was incredibly challenging. So we'd have this entire year of prepping for the visits. I mean there's all the logistics, right? There's the airfares, there's the travel insurance as the extra insurance for the dance regalia because Haidas love to dance and love to share their culture through performance and so they were bringing regalia.

Laura Peers: [25:24](#) There's the rooms and board and Oxford's there's the inevitable personal issues about passports and all that kind of stuff. And fortunately we had this amazing facilitator, Cara Krmpotich, who's now a professor at the University of Toronto, but she took this on and did the catalog records and did some basic conservation cleanup and just was the core of this project. So we get these 21 Haidas to Oxford and get them settled into Lady Margaret College. And then we started having sessions with, with the objects and the delegation. Every available trained staff member was up facilitating these sessions. I deployed my masters students to take notes because I knew that Cara and I will be running around like crazy and we wanted to do a kind of project ethnography. People like Faye Belsey, who's organizing this conference were also present in the room to take sort of official museum notes as people talk and we ask people, what do you want us to know? What do you not want us to record?

Laura Peers: [26:24](#) We were not prepared, prepared for the performative handling that Haida people engaged in; Nika Collison, the curator of the Haida Gwaii museum, had talked to me in advance about this and she said we are reconnecting with our ancestors were not just touching objects and you don't just look at ancestors, you know, if you're visiting an elder and an old age home, you hug them, you kiss them, you hold their hand who be with them physically. And so there's an embodied, a really, really important to embodied and affective component to indigenous reconnections within museum spaces. And I try to prepare my colleagues for this, and we just were all having trouble getting our heads around it. And finally some of the junior staff came to me a day before the delegation arrived and they said, so something gets broken during this performative handling, do we get fired? Like what happen actually? Because the museum's job is to keep objects safe, right? So if somebody is dancing the dance wand and the jaw falls off the salmon. Actually what happens? And I said, well, I'm senior and I'm tenured and they can't actually fire me, so I'll take this. I guess it's my project, I'll take it, I will be responsible for that. But the other thing we talked about was how to change the handling sessions from you can do this or you can't do this into we're all in this together and we're all going to have to deal with these issues together.

Laura Peers: [27:46](#) Haidas don't want to break anything, that's disrespectful to ancestors and disrespectful to the institution they're creating relationships were so when we we're, we're thinking the table and we've covered them with acid free tissue and then at the moment for that particular group of objects, we removed the tissue and said, okay, here's the briefing. There are four masks in this group. As you can see, the big blue one has a crack

running the length of the face. That's an old crack and it was stabilized before it was collected. And if you turn it over, conservative would turn it over, you can see there's a leather strap going across it in two places and that's been tacked down on either side so you can pick the mask up, but be aware you need to use a hand on each side and that it will feel unstable. And we're concerned about the leather because it's quite brittle and we don't want it to just fall apart. I mean we could replace it but better if you just keep the whole thing on the same plane and then if you want to raise it to your face, let's think about how we do that. Right?

Laura Peers:

[28:40](#)

And as we did that and we role-played that before the delegation got here, because nobody had ever dealt with this kind of visit before. And I wanted my colleagues to feel absolutely confident and also get us all into the right groove, that this was not us versus them, we are trying to create permanent relationships through this visit with the nation, they are trying to create permanent relationships with the museum through this visit. And we're all going to benefit from that. So we all need to treat each other as colleagues and not us versus them and you know really the only physical alteration to an object, I'll call it that I won't call it damage, it's a physical alteration to an object, occurred when Nika, at the end of the day was very tired and she was stroking a cedar mat and her finger caught the edge of the mat and a little tiny piece of cedar broke off and then one other time somebody picked up a rattle that had puffin beaks attached to it and one of the very brittle sinew wrappings that attached the puffin beaks, fell off.

Laura Peers:

[29:38](#)

And those are both entirely repairable issues. Conservation just got right on it and sorted it out. Every time those things occurred, the person who did it would say, stop, stop everybody stop. Something just happened, and we would all talk about it and agree what needed to happen. And then we will just continue. And in the meantime people were dancing, the dance wand, they were holding the mask to the face. They were putting, there is this fantastic bear octopus helmet in the collection, they were putting it on. I have a picture of every member of the delegation with that very appealing thing on. People were picking things up and bursting into tears. People were reconnecting with the ancestors, the language speaker they sent with the delegation, they always send an elder who was one of the last remaining born-speakers to try to retrieve words because when you touch things, it stimulates parts of your brain that trigger language that you might not have used for 60 years and so there's a word for paddles when they're in the bottom of the canoe and use to keep a boxes and things up

out of the bilge as opposed to the words your paddle when you're actually using it to paddle and that word for the for when you use the paddles is a kind of deck in the ship floating up and a word for a creature on a mask came back.

Laura Peers:

[30:51](#)

And you know, so all of these things were happening and museum staff. We're seeing these things brought to life, right? We normally say things static on shelves, completely immobile, and it was a paradigm shift for us to see that many of our collections in motion, being held, being loved -- there was a lot of emotion in these spaces -- and to see them resocialized, it made us realize that the database issues that have to do with classification and western scientific grid-like thinking, are also about desocializing objects and removing emotion and preexisting meanings, but primarily they're about desocializing things. So if objects in the research space are not just things, there are persons in particular material forms, they embody all kinds of ancestors and their knowledge in many ways, then one of the decolonizing things we need to do is accept that and then say, oh, I don't curate things and don't curate just objects, complex as though they may be, I also curate, in some cases living beings. In a few cases, objects are actually containing living beings, but in most cases, objects are simply very complex embodiments or metaphors for many, many generations of ancestors and their knowledge and the social relationships that people have to those persons. So at one point we were looking at chief's headdresses and PRM has three really important addresses, including one that belonged to Albert Edenshaw, who was a very famous Haida carver, and so we gave the briefing before we drop the tissue off, I think because they're very fragile, they have long ermine trailers, the ermine's very brittle. They have a flicker feathers and sea lion whiskers standing up and they're very brittle and then this is fantastic carving in the form of very supernatural beings with abalone inlay and the abalone inlays, it's glue. It's a bit brittle.

Laura Peers:

[32:53](#)

So we talked about the fragility of these things, and then we took the tissue off and the museum staff all stood back and then there was this long thick silence and then everybody burst into tears and the museum staff, we're all looking at each other and what you do? And so I made a sign that just was like this, just wait, this is, see what people want to do here. And then the elder, the language speaker, said we should sing for him. And I realized that it wasn't an object, that was a chief -- that was his headdress and they were mourning that person. And so they sang chief songs for him and they all kind of took a deep breath and we all took a deep breath. Okay. Tissue. And they said

where, where was it from? Because they were trying to figure out which chief it was, which village is this from?

Laura Peers:

[33:46](#)

And at that moment I thought museums are useless. Like really, we have no idea what village that, that headdress is from, that which never recorded. It's Haida. So we can't even tell you what village it comes from and you're trying to figure out which of your ancestors specifically this was so you can give them a decent funeral that maybe he never had. Like really how useless are these institutions, in some ways? And so we moved from this moment of intense socialization to, I had to look at the accession number on the object, to look it up in the database, right? And look at the record in this scientific grid database system and then turn back to the Haidas and say, okay, we know it was collected by Reverend Harrison, which means, and we know he was up in Masset at the north end of Haida Gwaii. It might've been from Masset, it certainly would be north end of the island, but I'm sorry, that's all I know.

Laura Peers:

[34:35](#)

And then they carried on singing for him, so he was resocialized again immediately, right? And then a couple of days later we all went down to the British Museum because we were working as well with the British Museum. And a very similar thing happened. I want to talk about this because this is about the performative and embodied and active element of this work. We were looking at a collection that had been removed from the grave on Haida Gwaii probably shortly after the 1862 smallpox epidemic. So in terms of provenance, this is about as bad as it gets. It was looted, it conjures up the smallpox epidemic, this is a problematic collection and one of the items is a woven chilkat blanket. And so we were looking at this chilkat blanket, and they're used as chiefs robes you're invested with, with your authority and you're given this Regalia, which includes the headdress and a blanket, and we had number of weavers in the delegation.

Laura Peers:

[35:27](#)

And so we wanted to make sure that they saw this very early weaving, so the British Museum. Staff had to put it on the table and they explained the problematic nature of this collection and says, you know, we're really sorry. That's. That is how it here, but here it is. And a similar thing happened when the tissue came off, there was this kind of quiet, small talk. They talked about how it was actually sewn to its back-anchor support, but they want them to see the other side, and could that happen? And then there was this profound thick silence, and some of the men clenched fists and physically drew back from the table. And you could feel this wave of anger as well as grief circling the

room. And then again, Gougenot, the elder said we should sing for him. And then she said, no, that's not enough.

Laura Peers:

[36:10](#)

We should dance for him, and they had some great dancers in the group and there is a chiefs dance, so the two young men honored their ancestor by coming forward to dance, but they hadn't expected to dance that day and so they had no regalia with them. They didn't even have a drum, and so the musician in the group Verne, was drumming on a table and everyone was singing and these two young men were doing the chiefs dance without their regalia and they were doing it extra, extra careful in their movement. So when you flick your head to release the down from your head dress in this dance, they were flicking their heads in very careful ways to release invisible down and they were swinging invisible cloaks and they were stamping their feet to use invisible puffin-beak rattles. And in the next building is the largest collection of historic Haida material culture in the world.

Laura Peers:

[37:01](#)

And again, you saying, what are we doing? Who are these institutions for? Why are we keeping this material? Who does that benefit and how do you translate situations like that into the cross-cultural education that we actually really need this material to do. We need this material to do that work, as well as to be able to reconnect with descendants of the artists, right? But if we're just keeping it on shelves, that's a problem. That is Smaug sitting on the hoard. So this material occupies vast amounts of resources -- museums always complain that they're under-resourced -- they have huge budgets in fact and they have large staff and they have these enormous complicated climate control systems, and they have marketing departments and education departments, but if we are not using this material for descendant populations, for cultural survival and for cross cultural education that has been codesigned by descendant populations. It's not enough anymore for white people to talk about other cultures with this material. That's not good enough, but that's our function as museums as is to make this material accessible both to descendant populations and to public audiences.

Chris Green:

[38:21](#)

One of the things that I think we can end with, but I would love to hear your thoughts and where the future is of museums are headed in terms of inclusion and the types of inclusion of indigenous specialists, curators, collaborators or whatever that might be. You speak a little bit to where you see things either needing to go, or where we're generally moving towards a at this point.

Laura Peers: [38:46](#) I think this issue will work differently in the UK, in Europe than it will within North America, say. Simply because of the physical distance and the political distance, but the physical distance means that it's much more difficult to bring delegations to museums and Britain. It's much more difficult just logistically, both for the museum and for indigenous delegates. They spend a lot of time with museums over here. I think we're still coming up with models that work to bring indigenous people into the museum to involve them in curation and stewardship and interpretation and we haven't even begun on models to involve indigenous peoples in governance of museums, which I would love to see -- I think it changes the ground when you have an indigenous community representative on your board.

Laura Peers: [39:34](#) We do a lot by Skype, we do a lot by, you know, zoom and the occasional delegation visit, but we really need to start getting much more creative and thinking about alliances of museums that can share costs, or bring a delegation over and who will then move around different museums in the UK. For the big Haida delegation, we worked with the British Museum and here, and we had a conference then that that brought all the curators in the UK who steward Haida materials to the museum, and I got all the curators to do a show and tell to the height of delegation and actually tell them what they had in their collections. People wanted to do it. I was surprised. I was concerned that my UK colleagues would be nervous about that, but actually so many people came to me saying, but we have six Haida objects in our collections -- "can I present too?". And so for a whole day we all got to sit in the lecture theater looking at beautiful pictures of beautiful Haida objects, talking about these things and letting people know where material was -- that was hugely successful and I think we need to do more of that kind of thing in the future. Just think of ways that we can bring everybody together and put them together for a few days with collections or even with photographs of collections and just start talking. But we also need to rethink our use of technology. I would love to do electronic field trips with items on the table and working with communities at a distance. I would love to see members of boards of governors Skype in to board meetings. We just have to keep our thinking caps on and be really creative about this because the problems of distance and costs are huge and they will limit what we can do.

Laura Peers: [41:06](#) But you know, when we started all of this kind of work, I didn't know where it might go to. I just knew that we had to start these conversations and see where it's led to. It's led to a fantastic partnership, so it's a permanent one between PRM and the Haida nation, that's led to a repatriation of an ancestral

remain, that's led to training, museum personnel in the PRM and the British Museum and new ways of working with indigenous peoples. It's led to collections improvements. It's led to interpretation improvements. It's led to public engagement. So at one point we had Haida carvers working with Oxfordshire carvers and just talking about carving and inspiring each other with how do you use that chisel, right? What did you do with it? So it's led to all kinds of person-to-person engagements. So I think we wouldn't have ever had, had we not started this dialogue, so I'm hopeful at the end of it and it will be really interesting to see where this goes.

Chris Green: [41:59](#) And with that I just want to thank you for being here. This was a really fantastic conversation. This was, I think it's going to be really valuable for the Anthropological Airwaves listeners, so thank you very much.

Laura Peers: [42:08](#) Great. Thank you.

Deborah Thomas: [42:28](#) Thank you for listening to this two-part podcast on decolonizing ethnographic museums. What we've heard emphasized throughout the series is the importance of relationships in changing practices. Our interlocutors have given us critical insights into how we might shift collecting and representational norms, but more importantly into how we might imagine access and inclusion moving into the future. While these are issues that have been vigorously debated within European museum settings, North American museums must also rethink their relationships to empire and establish tools for decolonization. We have some important precedents in place already, and we look forward to hearing more as this conversation develops.