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MUSEUM | FUTURES

# Museum | Futures

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*Molemo Moiloa*

## nto>ntu: Reimagining Relational Infrastructures of Museums in Africa

An African Museum is, in a sense, a kind of incongruity. Because a museum is, in its foundation and principle, inherently European. Accumulation, conquest, extraction, materialism and consumption, sexism, racism and dehumanization form very much a part of the principles of European cultural practice that the museum is built upon. Instantiation of these principles for the museum rests in the nucleus of 'the object'. And it is within rethinking the object – particularly in the coming restitution of material and ancestral culture back to the African continent – that new imaginations of the Museum in Africa become possible. This text considers the potential of what a move from physical infrastructures to social ones, might enable for museums in Africa. Taking from AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) concept of people as infrastructure, I argue for a reimagination of the place of the object – repatriated or local – as of value primarily in its potential for the social and relational infrastructures that it might enable. And that in doing so we might completely rethink the role and form of the museum in Africa, and perhaps even begin to conjure the first inklings of what an African museum might be.

To think the museum away from the object is to think the museum away from its colonial inheritance. The object as nucleus of the museum is also the holder of complex colonial inheritances that decolonial practices seek to undo. First and foremost the object serves as signifier for a kind of materialist fixation so particular to the obsessive accumulation of colonial era 'discovery', and even more so of the so-called 'punitive expedition'. The curator, the epitome of the museum worker, whose title stems from the Latin root word for 'care', emerged too from this obsession, as the 'carer' of the object. The problematics of care for the object as the central capacity of museum labour is increasingly raised

in international museums discourse. Yesomi Umolu (2020), in her 15 point list *on the limits of care and knowledge* within the museum states at number 11 that, “To acknowledge the limits of your knowing and caretaking is an important step.” She raises a concern over the museum’s historical care of the object taking precedence (sometimes even violently) over care for the humans from whom these objects emanate – a colonial and capitalist inheritance of value for things over people, particularly people of colour.

This history of the object and its associated obsession of accumulation permeates much of contemporary life and its urgencies. One important example is global concern with the planetary challenges we face, and the decolonial unlearnings we must undertake to avert total climate crisis. The western colonial inheritance of accumulation, consumption and extraction lie at the heart of our current planetary crisis and of the challenges that lie ahead in driving an effective ‘extinction rebellion’. For museums, the concerns over climate change often manifests in talk of less flights, green energies for internal climate control systems etc. (Richardson 2018) but are rarely brave enough to engage with the very object foundation of the museums existence. However, in the space of Natural History Museums, a real conversation about the problematics of the museum’s tradition of accumulation has become far more severe. The ICOM Code of Ethics for Natural History Museums (2013) raises distinctly the need for museums to consider, and then doubly consider, the need to increase their collections considering the impact such actions have had on the natural world. The planetary impacts of museum collecting for Natural History Museums may be more obvious. But the direct link between cultures of extractive and consumptive practices and museum collecting should be clear to all museums. As more and more museums in the minority world find their storerooms too full, with some of them even flooding or on (wild)fire due to climate change (Rea and Halperin 2017), museums are faced with the realities of accumulation’s – and collection’s – complicity in the realities of our planetary crisis.

This is of course not to say that others – or Africans specifically – have not had strong roles for the material in their cultural practices. But rather to say that the special flavour of European colonial materialism in particular, has had a distinct role to play in the ugly realities of our present moment. The concept of the fetish for example, is a European invention often foisted upon ‘Others’ as a kind of material obsession and idol worship specific to the object. Writers such as A.A. Cheng have discussed this in detail (2006), situating fetishism within a psycho-analytic frame of colonial eroticism and fantasy. Flynn and Barringer in their book *Colonialism and the Object* (1998) discuss the western invention of the fetish, and infer that it is a quintessential example of “how three-dimensional artefacts can mediate the power relations that underlie the colonial project” (1998, 3). The way we understand the role of the object in the museum must then, be understood entirely within the psychologies of accumulation, conquest, extraction, materialism and consumption, sexism, racism and dehumanization of colonialism and its episteme. As stated by Françoise Vergès on the proposed development of the new Maison des civilisations et de l’unité réunionnaise (MCUR), “to us, the accumulation of objects destined to celebrate the wealth of a nation belonged to an economy of predation, looting defeated peoples or exploiting the riches of others. It belonged to an economy of consumption that invested the object with narcissistic meaning, making visible one’s identity and social status” (Vergès 2014, 25). As such, Vergès and others looking to imagine this new museum sought to create “a museum without objects” as a way of rethinking the museum in Africa.

Vergès points to the fact that, in recognising the role that objects play in the colonial imagination and its object accumulation centred sense of value, the museum in Africa must question what the object means for it. And in understanding the problematic stories – such as those of the fetish – told about African histories of object relations, there is work to be done to rewrite these in ways that imagine away from this colonial inheritance. This asks specific questions too, of restitution, which continues to be framed within minority world discourse as a matter of *return of objects*. Yet if we understand the focus on the object to be an

epistemic imaginary of the colonial project, then we must ask in what ways restitution processes do not assume this mentality again. We must ask in what ways a restitution that emanates from African epistemes might completely reimagine the place and purpose of the object.

AbdouMaliq Simone, in his formative text *People as Infrastructure* (2004) on the nature of low-income, systemic infrastructures in cities such as Johannesburg, potentially offers some thoughts for an alternative. He states;

“Infrastructure is commonly understood in physical terms, as reticulated systems of highways, pipes, wires, or cables. These modes of provisioning and articulation are viewed as making the city productive, reproducing it, and positioning its residents, territories, and resources in specific ensembles where the energies of individuals can be most efficiently deployed and accounted for. By contrast, I wish to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people’s activities in the city. African cities are characterised by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used”. (407)

If we translate this idea of people as infrastructure in the city into the museum, we challenge our supposition of the museum as objects and climate control systems and large imposing buildings. Instead, we are able to use existing forms of African life and meaning making to imagine a move away from reticulated physical structures to reticulated social ones. And in doing so, enable a museum that can be as ‘incessantly flexible, mobile and provisional’ as Africans might need it to be. Importantly Simone points to the principle that people as infrastructure specifically refers to “collaboration among residents seemingly marginalized from and immiserated by urban life” (407), which is to say those Africans not well served by the inheritances of ‘proper’ infrastructures who must, therefore, find alternatives. A social and relational infrastructure then, is a possible way to think away from the physical, the accumulated, and the left behind by our colonial ancestors. People as museum infrastructure potentially becomes a move away from the grand building and the stuff inside it; and towards the infrastructure of relationship, economy and social value. Museums perhaps function not

as houses of civilization, but rather as central nodes from which a network of social knowledge frameworks, meaning making and collective education might emerge.

The concept of people as infrastructure also finds deep resonance with existing deep epistemes of knowledge and society making on this continent. 'ntu' is the root word that grounds humanist traditions, practice and ontologies for much of so-called sub-saharan Africa. These humanist traditions – completely independent of the anthropocentric humanist philosophies of the occident – frame a centering of people as framework (read structure) of societal, economic, ecological and ethical practice and being (Shumba 2011, Letseka 2000 and many others). For many Bantu languages, 'nto' is the root of the word for 'thing'. While not connotative of anything denigratory, 'nto' certainly doesn't hold the depth of social and intellectual value of 'ntu'. As an established social and philosophical standing, these humanist traditions that put people at the centre of infrastructures serve as a well worn framework for thinking the museum in Africa.

How might this play out in practice? A commitment to the role of the museum within community social and political reproduction is certainly the first start. And a number of museums on the African continent offer important examples of this. The Uganda National Museum's travelling interactive exhibitions and oral history programmes are one such example. Differently, the District Six museum's continued commitment to the social and political values of its founding, creates a space that is as much museum as it is community mobilization centre. There are of course other such examples. I would argue however, that the momentum towards restitution on the African continent potentially offers us even greater potential to reimagine the functioning of the museum in Africa.

We might benefit from understanding the role of the museum in restitution as an infrastructure of people and social relations – and a central node from which this is facilitated. We then might be able to decenter the 'thing' that is the object, and focus more on the mobile, provisional, relations of meaning making that encircle it. Restitution then

becomes less about the return of the ‘thing’, and certainly less about returning them to the physical infrastructures of museums. Instead, we might ground the process of restitution in social linkages, meaning for its people, the healing of scars, enabling reconnections to cultures and histories.

We could focus on the telling of stories – as a distinctly relational and agentive practice. As is invoked in the name of the Keleketla! Library (Allen 2020), an art space based in Johannesburg, the telling of stories requires call and response, a kind of collective narrative making (‘keleketla!’ is the response called out to the story teller in response to the story teller looking to confirm you are still listening). In so doing we would tell new stories, write revisionist histories and rewrite them again. For Keleketla! this manifests in understanding heritage as living, and related to the lives of young people. In their years long heritage project that used the site of their library – the Drill Hall and venue of the historic treason trial – to frame a range of programmes. The programmes that sought to write the stories of now – and particularly of children based in the inner-city of Johannesburg, in relation to the long arm of history that still informs these childrens’ present. Storytelling of all forms were reinforced as a legitimate and real site of meaning making in relation to the physical remnants of this real history that was the Drill Hall. Intergenerational dialogues, writing workshops, dance training, even the development of children-run talk shows, all enabled these young people to explore the power of telling stories, but also empowered these young people to draw straight lines from this history to their present realities (Hlasane 2014). Rassool and Witz (2008) point to the need to ‘make histories’ – a term that points to the agentive, productive and active process of heritage and history telling. They suggest that “how knowledge is negotiated, circulated and contested amongst different constituencies, publics and academic locales are important to making histories” (2008, 15). This fluid and mobile approach makes claims for multiple voices, reimagining the roles of ‘sources’ and the idea of the expert historian, questioning knowledge in ways that don’t seek to replace one false truth with another but remain fluid. The Zambian Women’s History Museum does just this, hold-

ing Wikipedia workshops to populate the web with stories of African women of history and developing podcasts and animated videos that share these narratives. Their forms of story telling are regularly digital, contemporary and use open data formats to encourage the layering of additional layers on top of them. Their podcast series is also animated in videos on YouTube and given amplification through Ted talks. Their strategy is to use contemporary forms of narrative making, story telling and value delineation to share indigenous knowledges and create a critical mass for these knowledges in the public realm.

We need new skills. To encourage a social space for the making of histories, and the making of meaning by museums, the historical kind of 'care' of the curator must shift. A people as museum infrastructure approach understands that care must shift to people rather than to objects, it understands that the making of histories requires negotiation and contestation, it questions the expert and the idea of the authentic or truth. We are looking for skills that enable the provisional and the incomplete, that makes spaces for multiple voices, for anger and for pain, but also for healing and exploration. The museum workers of the people as infrastructure museum are still carers but with different understandings of what it means to care. They are social workers, healers, faith and religious workers, storytellers and griots.

We might empty out the halls, and leave the walls blank. A statement by Prime Minister Cameron stated that if all the objects were returned from the British Museum then the museum would be empty (Prince 2010). Njoki Ngumi of the Nest Collective, based in Nairobi, recalls how this idea of the empty museum was so arresting for the collective that it inspired a series of short stories and a multi-year restitution project (Ngumi 2020). This image of the empty museum is exciting because it asks of us, what is the meaning of the museum that does not rely on the colonial violence of object obsession to offer something to society. If the museum were emptied of all of its objects what could it be? And which people would still be there, committed to working through the difficult questions of what role a museum plays in a more just future.

Thinking the museum as social infrastructure challenges our imagination to refuse the violent inheritance of the museum of our colonial ancestors. It summons us to dream up other ways. But these other ways are also grounded in our own histories, epistemes and existing practices. To move from 'nto' to 'ntu', the 'thing' to the 'human' is a substantially destabilising proposal for the museum in Africa, at least as far as we have operated up to this point. But it is also not foreign, or strange or difficult to grasp for a museum in Africa that identifies itself through an ontology of its place. There are many museum professionals, cultural projects and creative practitioners already testing out alternatives that lean in this direction. There are ways of remembering and memorializing, skills of social practice and imagination that we already have. And these ways offer us localized and pre-colonised strategies that might enable a museum in Africa that is African, but also of the contemporary moment and responding to the urgencies of now. Like Simone's people as infrastructure, we might look around us at how ordinary life finds its way through the morass of the post-colony, and discover familiar paths forward.

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Why museums? What for? Whoever believes they are just dusty tombs of the past needs to read this book. To think about the museum means to contemplate the consequences of globalization, the continuing presence of the colonial past in different parts of the world, and the relevance of the museum in education, cultural heritage and political and social discourse. The texts by philosophers, activists, curators and social scientists from four continents, shed light on a wide range of critical questions related to the future of the museum and the museum of the future—questions that are intertwined with how we envision our pasts, presents and futures as communities and countries.

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