Reassembling the Collection

1

Reassembling Ethnographic Museum Collections

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This volume addresses fundamental questions about the nature, value, and efficacy of museum collections in a postcolonial world and the agency of indigenous people in their production. The book's primary focus lies with those objects that, by way of their specific histories, have been defined as "ethnographic"; however, the question of the contexts in which things are defined as "art" as opposed to "artifact" (e.g., Clifford 1988, 1997; Danto 1988; Putnam 1991; Marcus and Myers 1995; Gell 1998; Thomas 1999b; Myers 2001) also constitutes a key concern. The book is most appropriately situated within the context of various postcolonial critiques of the role of museums and museum collections in the politics of indigenous represen- tation (e.g., Clifford 1988, 1995; O'Hanlon 1993; Greenfield 1996; Lidchi 1997; Barringer and Flynn 1998; Russell 2001; Karp and Lavine 1991; Fforde, Hubert, and Turnbull 2002; Kramer 2006; Cuno 2008; Lonetree and Cobb 2008; Sleeper-Smith 2009) and as a reaction to the perception that indigenous people had little or no agency in the processes that were responsible for the genesis of ethnographic museum collections (largely a phenomenon of the exercising of asymmetrical colonial power relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Although we see this book as a product of that literature and its accompanying themes, what sets it apart from much of the current literature is that it makes a signifi- cant attempt to move beyond the concerns of the politics of representation,

which have tended to dominate critical museum studies (Macdonald 2011), to consider the affective qualities of things alongside their representational role in the museum. Similarly, in considering the complex material and social interactions of things, people, and institutions that constitute ethnographic collections, we attempt to move beyond the observation that indigenous people and ethnographic objects had (and continue to have) agency, to consider how concepts of agency and indigeneity need to be reconfigured in the light of their study within the context of the museum. In doing so, the volume develops a series of new concepts and considers their application to historical and contemporary engagements between ethnographic museums and the various individuals and communities who were and are involved in their production. These themes have profound implications not only for understanding the ongoing processes that have formed museum collections in the past and present but also for developing new and innovative curatorial practices in the future. Key concepts include the idea of museums as meshworks and as material and social assemblages; the ways in which the application of an archaeological sensibility might inform approaches to understanding the past and present relationships between people, "things," and institutions in relation to museums; and the curatorial responsibility that arises from a reconsideration of the nature of museum "objects."

Although the book develops novel concepts and approaches, this is not entirely new ground. Several important books and journal articles have trod parts of this path before us (e.g., Stocking 1985; Thomas 1991, 1994; Phillips and Steiner 1999; Myers 2001; Gosden and Knowles 2001; Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006; Gosden, Larson, and Petch 2007; Larson, Petch, and Zeitlyn 2007; Sleeper-Smith 2009; Byrne et al. 2011). Indeed, after years of neglect, objects in general and museum objects in particular have come to the foreground of anthropological, archaeological, and sociological analyses, as part of what some have termed a broad "material-cultural turn" in the social sciences and humanities (cf. Hicks 2010; Joyce and Bennett 2010; Olsen 2010). The title, *Reassembling the Collection*, not only suggests that we aim to consider ways in which museum collections might be reconceptualized and reworked in a postcolonial present and future but also invokes the title of Bruno Latour's influential *Reassembling the Social* (2005). Latour is perhaps the most well-known of a series of scholars involved in the development of actor-network theory (ANT), and science and technology studies more generally, who have done a great deal to foreground the network metaphor in the study of social relationships and to promote an interest in the involvement of nonhumans (or things) in social networks. This work has generated much comment across the social

sciences and humanities, particularly with regard to the contention that objects might be said to have "agency" and to act in ways that could be considered to be broadly "person-like" (e.g., Hicks 2010; Olsen 2010). We note a parallel set of interests here in the revisionary attribution of agency both to indigenous *people* and to indigenous *objects* in museum collections. Although the chapters have been more or less influenced by debates that arise from these parallel areas of research, the intention of this book is to move this area of research forward by developing a more sophisticated approach to agency and the fields of material and social relations that constitute the contemporary museum and its histories. Much of the work on indigenous agency in colonial contexts has relied on the concept of the "contact zone" (after Pratt 1992; Clifford 1997) in exploring the interactions of indigenous people and others. A key aim of this book is to move beyond what could be interpreted as an asymmetrical and broadly neo-colonial engagement with this concept (Bennett 1998; Dibley 2005; Boast 2011) to develop new models for understanding the networks of social and material interactions that center on the space of the museum collection.

Perhaps equally important, the book is also a product of what we discuss as the "curatorial responsibility," which arises out of a nexus of interests. For researchers, this curatorial responsibility results from engagements with particular individuals and groups, most especially, indigenous people, around museum objects and collections. At a broader level, it also arises from the "weight" of things in museums. In making reference to the weight of things, we mean not only the physical bulk of collections, which occupy vast storage facilities behind the scenes of museums around the world, but also their political and affective weight. The "affective" weight of things in museums refers to the charismatic (Wingfield 2010) or enchanting (Gell 1998; Harrison 2006) qualities of objects, their ability to engage the senses (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006:12), and their ability to act in ways that are both integral to and generative of human behavior or even in ways that are person-like, in conjunction with or independently of people (e.g., Harvey 2005; Jones and Cloke 2008; Olsen 2010; Basu 2011). Things also have a political weight, in the sense that they come to symbolize or stand in for various imperial and colonial processes, which underlie their presence in museum collections. In addition to reminding us of imperial and colonial histories, things speak to the contemporary political and ethical issues of the ownership of culture and its products. It has perhaps become passé to speak of the enthusiasm for objects that has driven many to a career in museum curatorship, archaeology (e.g., Shanks 1992; Webmoor 2012), object-centered anthropology (e.g., Miller 2010), or sociology. However, the

genuine ideology of care that often underlies the practice of curatorship shares many characteristics with indigenous notions of the custodial obligations that arise from and in relation to things (e.g., Haber 2009; Kreps 2003, 2011). This book aims to explore these synergies and their ability to generate new conceptions of care and curation as genuine forms of respect and concern in the contemporary museum and beyond.

INDIGENOUS AGENCY

In putting together the proposal for the advanced seminar, the co-chairs asked contributors specifically to consider the issue of indigenous agency in relation to the formation of museum collections. In reflecting on this aim for the seminar, it is important to explore why we saw indigenous agency as worthy of special consideration. I have already noted that this book is perhaps best situated as emerging from, and forming a partial response to, scholarship on the politics of indigenous representation within the museum (e.g., Karp and Lavine 1991; Simpson 1996), itself a product of an indigenous critique of the role of anthropological and archaeological forms of expertise and knowledge production in processes of colonial governmentality and the subjectification of indigenous people (e.g., Deloria 1969; Tuhiwai Smith 2006[1999]; Nakata 2007; Hoerig 2010). As seminar organizers, our interest in indigenous agency emerged from what we saw as a lack of recognition of the many ways in which indigenous people had been active in shaping museum collections in the past and their ongoing role in doing so in the present (Byrne et al. 2011, 2011a; see also Jacknis 2002; Hoerig 2010; McCarthy 2011). For many of the participants, this interest emerged as a result of direct involvement in developing collaborative research around museums and material culture with particular groups of indigenous people and from an emerging sense that a consideration of "museum as method" (cf. Thomas 2010; see also Moutu 2007) might reveal new ways of reading objects and collections "along [and perhaps even across] the archival grain" (after Stoler 2009; see also Bell 2010a). Although the authors in this volume are interested in indigenous agency in different ways, all attempt to show how indigenous agency is connected with other forms of agency, drawing on a definition of indigeneity that is performed and emergent. Thinking about indigenous agency in this way raises questions of how it is manifested by, interpreted by, mediated by, distributed by, and entangled with museum collections.

Two of the key questions this raises for the contributors—a mixed group of mostly non-indigenous scholars—are, "Who are we to speak of and for indigenous agency?" and "What can we contribute to this issue?"

I have already noted the ways in which postcolonial literatures raise questions of indigenous agency and, in particular, the ways in which forms of governmental practice grounded in archaeological and anthropological expertise have denied indigenous agency in the production of museum collections. Given that these are, broadly speaking, the disciplinary areas from which each of the authors writes, we believe that the questions that have been raised by the assertion of indigenous agency require us to look into the histories of our disciplines and examine these concerns and to bring from that process insights that can reformulate questions of indigenous agency in relation to our disciplinary practices and to curatorial practices within the museum (see Nakata 2007; Hoerig 2010; Kreps 2011). Clearly, in light of the historical roles that each of the disciplines represented by the contributors has played in attempts to subjugate indigenous people, there is a need not only to be humble and listen to the points of view of indigenous people themselves, but also to speak from within our disciplines and respond to issues raised by external political contexts, to bring them back to look at questions of indigenous agency, and, in the process, to reformulate the questions and nature of our disciplines and their relationship to governmental processes in the museum.

Many of the contributions to this volume bring what might be called an "archaeological sensibility" (see Shanks 1992) to a contemporary version of the "hidden from history" problematic (or "history from below"; e.g., Samuel 1996) in their attempts to explore how indigenous people have contributed to the shape of museum collections. This is one of the reasons that the authors insist on the need to uncouple intentionality from concepts of agency. Many of the forms of agency explored in these chapters reveal the ways in which indigenous agency in the past was not necessarily formulated or enacted with direct reference to the question of museum politics but nonetheless had an important impact on the formation of museum collections and on the representation, conceptualization, and governance of indigenous people. We do not want to downplay the difference between unintended influences and the points at which indigenous agency asserts itself explicitly as a political project in relation to the museum. Instead, we seek to raise this as an important historical question. At what point does indigenous agency become a matter of specific intentionality in relation to the museum? Under what circumstances can we speak of indigenous agency occurring, and in relation to what?

Clearly, when indigenous agency takes the form of an explicit intentionality with regard to the museum, this has implications in terms of how a whole range of other agencies begin to interact, and the issue of the

histories of categories of indigeneity is invoked. Significant contemporary indigenous networks deal with the extension of indigeneity as a concept and with the championing of indigenous concerns, for example, through global indigenous peoples movements. Nonetheless, we need to be careful about romanticizing indigenous agency or reading contemporary forms of agency backward into the past. This would simply serve to undermine the importance of the political project of the contemporary indigenous critique of museums in the same way as denying forms of indigenous agency in relation to the formation of museum collections would.

The project of seeking indigenous agency clearly raises a series of other questions, which the chapters in the volume address in different ways. What are the obligations that arise from the politicization of the relationship between indigenous people and museums? How do different methodologies allow us to explore agency? Can "things" be "indigenous"? Key to understanding these questions in relation to museum collections are processes of categorization, classification, ordering, and governance of things and people. One of the most important of these relates to the categorization and definition of "indigeneity" itself.

INDIGENEITY

To speak of "indigenous agency" raises the question of the definition and history of the concept of indigeneity, which itself is closely bound up with the history of museum collections. The rise of ethnographic collecting in museums in Western Europe, Great Britain, North America, and their colonies was closely associated with the projects of colonialism (e.g., Thomas 1991; Griffiths 1996; McCarthy 2007; MacKenzie 2010), imperialism (e.g., Coombes 1994; Barringer and Flynn 1998; Henare 2005), and the development of the professional field of anthropology (e.g., Hinsley 1981a, 1981b; Stocking 1985, 1991; Jenkins 1994; Conn 1998; Wolfe 1999; Jacknis 2002; Sherman 2004, 2011; Kuklick 1991, 2011; Shelton 2000, 2011). Although, historically, objects collected from indigenous people by Western travelers were perhaps acquired merely as curios or as a way of marking the achievements of voyages to exotic locations (Thomas 1991:141; Abt 2011), during the nineteenth century, museums came to form the spaces in which subsequent understandings of indigeneity (by way of discourses of "primitiveness" and "savageness") were defined, drawing on ethnographic collections that were perceived as the materializations of Otherness (e.g., Fabian 1983; Stocking 1985; Ames 1992; Pearce 1995:308ff.; Russell 2001; Bennett 2004). These ethnographic collections were defined as such not by where and from whom they had been collected, but by the ways in which they

were detached and exhibited as fragments of other cultures (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991). In this way, both things and their modes of exhibition and display became central to the definition of indigenous people. This process had far-reaching implications for developing normative notions of culture that could be employed within regimes of social management (Bennett 1995, 2004, 2005). Museums thus had a function in providing an ordered model of culture that reinforced evolutionary notions of social and technological progress.

It is customary to speak today of the category of "indigenous people" in relation to ethnographic museums, but when we begin to explore it as a category for analysis, its shallow history becomes immediately apparent. Indeed, the term "indigenous" has come into common use only since the mid-1970s through the prominence of globalized indigenous rights movements and the work of the United Nations and associated groups that have championed the shared experiences of marginalized peoples (Sanders 1989; Kuper 2003; Kirsch 2001; Feldman 2002; Niezen 2003; Merlan 2008). Rowse (2008) has shown how the category of "indigenous people" was first used in the 1920 Covenant of the League of Nations and subsequently found definition through the work of the United Nations' International Labour Organization (ILO) in the 1930s in relation to the potential of "native" labor and the idea that responsibility for the welfare of Aboriginal peoples should be removed from the nation-state and entrusted to an international body. As such, the term "indigenous" became a synonym for a sort of problematized difference that required careful management through international intervention. With the emergence of international indigenous rights movements in the mid-1970s, Rowse (2008) argues, indigeneity in the major settler colonial nation-states (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States) has been defined through an ambivalence toward national labor markets, which has contributed to the ongoing maintenance of difference between indigenes and settlers and the emergence of what might be perceived as a new "indigenous modernity." Key to the definition of indigeneity has been the delineation of a series of threats and forms of vulnerability that are perceived to be a direct function of indigeneity with regard to the common good of post–World War II development, especially in relation to international organizations such as the World Bank. Ironically, given the emphasis on the local within discourses of indigeneity, "indigenousness" has largely come to be defined through the work of various international conventions, in particular, the ILO's Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention (1957) and its revision, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989).

Merlan (2008) notes two broad ways in which indigeneity is defined in contemporary use. The first is "relational," in which indigenous people are defined in opposition to another category, for example, "settler colonists" or "the state." The second she terms "criterial," citing Martinez Cobo (1986:5, par. 379) for the United Nations, who defines indigenous communities, peoples, and nations as "those which have a historical continuity with preinvasion and precolonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves as distinct from other sectors of societies now prevailing in those territories…and are determined to preserve and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples" (Merlan 2008:305). The globalization of the term has tended to obscure the local variability of the self-definitions of indigenous peoples and communities; indeed, Béteille (1998; see also Kuper 2003) notes the ways in which the term "indigenous" has come to stand in for old anthropological notions of "tribal" or "primitive" people. In this way, the term "indigenous" has inherited the discursive baggage associated with the categories of primitiveness and savagery by way of their development through specific modes of exhibition and display in ethnographic museum collections. Nonetheless, there are important differences between contemporary understandings of indigeneity, "complexly understood as subjectivities, knowledge and practices of the earliest human inhabitants of a particular place and including legal and racial identities" (Delugan 2010), and the older anthropological notions of "tribal" people, which were created in museums. An important subject for discussion is thus the ways in which and the extent to which the contemporary museum is involved in the production of these new notions of indigeneity.

Indigeneity, drawing on the discourses of ethnographic museums, is defined as having a specific relationship with time and place: indigenous people are perceived to be both spatially bounded and relegated to the past (Byrne 1996). And while we do not deny the importance of the ethical and political issues raised by indigenous rights movements, nor the real need to acknowledge the impact of colonialism on first peoples, we are cautious about the ways in which old stereotypes of indigenous peoples as primitive, marginalized Others continue to be employed within the space of the contemporary museum (Prasad 2003; Dias 2008). Clearly, indigeneity cannot be taken as a given, and it is important to explore how it is constructed as a subject and category within the museum. Similarly, diasporic forms of indigeneity need to be recognized and placed in relation to narratives of continuity, and the relationship of indigenous people to other minorities and majorities needs exploration in relation to processes of transnationalism

and globalization. This raises questions about the circumstances under which indigeneity emerged as a category and its relationship to notions of time, situatedness, place, and the politics of representation. Indigeneity needs to be perceived as a status that is subject to various modes of adjudication and different forms of authority, as a discourse of rights, as well as values. In this sense, despite its emphasis on the connection between culture and race (Kuper 2003), indigeneity must be perceived as contextual. Chapters in this collection address this problematic implicitly or explicitly in a number of different ways.

In thinking about indigeneity in relation to museum collections, the contributors are influenced by Clifford's (2001, 2004; see also 1997) discussion of indigeneity as performed and emergent (see also Merlan 2008), drawing on Stuart Hall's (1986) articulation theory. This acknowledges both the important work done by indigenous activists and scholars to demonstrate their sustained experiences of cultural continuity, survival, and resistance (e.g., Deloria 1969; de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Hoerig 2010) and a definition of indigeneity that is innovative, emergent, and mobile. Putting aside an organismic model of culture for an articulated one, the arrival and departure of traditions and practices are perceived not as aspects of cultural decline, but as necessary moments of uncoupling and rearticulation. Articulation theory recognizes that cultures and cultural forms can and must be "made, unmade and remade" (Clifford 2001:479). Thus, the transformation of one aspect of culture, for example, language, does not cause the "death" of the "culture-as-organism" but instead is seen as a moment of reassembling or remaking. This means that the question of authenticity is removed and cultural "invention" is rearticulated as cultural persistence and continuity.

CATEGORIES OF VALUE, GOVERNANCE, AND THE CLASSIFICATION OF PEOPLE AND THINGS

Central to the museum are processes of assembling, categorizing, comparing, classifying, ordering, and reassembling (e.g., Stewart 1993; Baudrillard 1994; Elsner and Cardinal 1994; Pearce 1995; Bennett 1995, 2004; Byrne et al. 2011b), processes that relate to modern scientific practices more generally (e.g., Latour 1993; Law 1994; Bowker 2005; Hopwood, Schaffer, and Secord 2010; Schlanger 2010). All of these processes involve judgments of value and putting "things" in place. We might think here of Mary Douglas's (2010[1966]) work on dirt; dirt is taboo because it represents "matter out of place." In the same way, museum collections have implicit within them particular sets of values, which are reproduced through particular

systems of authority and expertise that seek to purify ethnographic objects as things simultaneously "in" and "out of" place. These categories of value help create the institutional spaces into which things can be slotted in the museum.

Although debates between indigenous peoples (and their supporters) and museums have often been perceived to center on repatriation and issues of ownership, it is possible to argue that these debates have more often been about the need to fundamentally reform curatorial practice in relation to things held in museum collections (e.g., Isaac 2009; Hoerig 2010). A major part of the indigenous analysis of museum practice has involved a critique of the categorization, management, and storage of things in ways that are not only foreign to indigenous ontologies but also potentially offensive or even dangerous (e.g., Henry 2004; Lonetree 2006; Sully 2007). Recently, museums have begun to acknowledge indigenous categories and curatorial practices as forms of expertise equal to those of museum curators (e.g., Herle 2002; Peers and Brown 2003; Chaat Smith 2008; Chavez Lamar 2008; Singer 2008). This is part of a broader process of the reorganization of contemporary museums in relation to the goal of widening access and engagement (e.g., Macdonald and Silverstone 1990; Karp and Lavine 1991; Message 2006; Macdonald 2011), a process that has in turn occurred alongside the "postmodern restructuring" (cf. Prior 2011) of museums as part of the development of new entrepreneurial cityscapes (Hetherington 2008; Frey and Meier 2011). In many instances, indigenous viewpoints about objects have been given their own space in museum catalogs and databases (e.g., Sleeper-Smith 2009). However, although this is obviously an important step in acknowledging indigenous forms of knowledge practices and expertise and emphasizes the museum itself as a space for reconciliation and social change (e.g., Kelly and Gordon 2002; Mpumlwana et al. 2002; Allen and Hamby 2011), this does not necessarily reform the system. The original categories and underlying values on which they rest often remain in place. Consequently, it does not lead to a real sharing of authority (Hoerig 2010; Boast 2011), only to a reorganization of existing categories to accommodate differing perspectives. This process can in turn often be redeployed within the context of contemporary museums in the production of difference (Hetherington 2002; Bennett 2006, 2011a; Dias 1998, 2008; Sherman 2008).

The incorporation of indigenous categories within the museum has emerged as part of a project of reforming the categories on which it was established as an institution, but the authors in this volume argue that we need to go further in drawing attention to the very nature of the categories

themselves and the forms of authority on which they draw (and which they subsequently reproduce). Part of this process involves acknowledgment that classification and ordering can only ever be partially realized (cf. Law 1994) and, indeed, that any attempt to categorize will always produce anomalies (Douglas 2010[1966]). Revealing the process of categorization to be partial and incomplete undermines the universalizing mission of the museum (Bennett 1995) and draws attention to the ways in which the categories it employs are not "natural," but actively formed out of particular systems of value. Such a project contains the potential for a radical reconceptualization of things in museum collections and their relationship with people. For example, what would happen if we were to consider things in museums as "kin" (see Hays-Gilpin and Lomatewama, chapter 10, this volume), who might be displaced or "in diaspora" (Basu 2011)? How would this transform curatorial practices and modes of ordering and classification within the museum and in heritage practice more generally (see also Harrison and Rose 2010; Harrison 2012)?

Indigenous people have been articulating this point of view for some time (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2004; Rose 2004; Harvey 2005; Haber 2009), but the "ontological turn" (cf. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Alberti and Bray 2009) in the social sciences and humanities has begun to trouble the strict impermeability of the categories of persons and things and has helped make possible such a radical new way of conceiving of museum objects. Adopting a perspective that acknowledges a broad ontology of "connectivity" (Rose and Robin 2004; Barad 2007; Rose 2011) between humans, objects, plants, animals, and the world in which they reside has radical implications for museum and heritage practices (see Harrison 2012). Contributors to this volume remain open to the ways in which contemporary indigenous agency may provide the basis for revising the underlying philosophy of curatorial practice, which could bring about the reform of museum categories and museums as institutions. This observation brings us to the next point about the curatorial responsibilities that arise from the weight of things.

CURATORIAL RESPONSIBILITY

One of the important themes that links many of the chapters in this book is a transformed notion of curatorial responsibility to things in museum collections. We suggest that this curatorial responsibility arises from two different (but closely linked) sources. The first is the obligations that arise from collaborations between researchers and indigenous and other minority community groups. Museums have recently adopted a

broader sense of accountability and an expanded conception of their publics, and many of the contributors to this volume approach their work as museum professionals, archaeologists, and anthropologists as collaborative, community-based research. Indeed, since the 1990s, collaborations between museums and "source communities" have taken an increasingly central place in exhibition development. Such collaborations are transformative not only in terms of the results of the outputs of collaboratively designed museum displays but also in terms of the practices of individuals as academics and museum professionals (e.g., Young and Goulet 1998). However, as Schultz (2011) argues, in many cases, the public is not aware of or even misunderstands the nature of these collaborations. Nonetheless, this way of working not only generates creative friction, which is potentially generative of new forms of knowledge, but also has the potential to transform the values of researchers and their attitudes toward the objects with which they work. One way in which it does this is by introducing new ontological models for conceptualizing the relationship between persons and things, which require a sharing of curatorial expertise and authority (Boast 2011:67, after Clifford 1997:210; see also Hoerig 2010; Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2010). Knowles (chapter 9, this volume), for example, addresses this issue directly in relation to her collaborations on the reconstruction of Te Tūhono, the Māori *waka* in the National Museum of Scotland.

The second source of transformation of the notion of curatorial responsibility is linked to the obligations that stem from the historical, physical, and political "weight" of objects. The chapters in this volume arise from a particular intellectual milieu in which it is increasingly accepted that things are not inert but play an active role in social relations. If we accept a model of objects as agents, having "charisma" (Wingfield 2010) or even potentially being "kin," this implies certain responsibilities to the things themselves, which may be separate from our obligations to the individuals and groups (indigenous or otherwise) outside the museum who relate to these things in some way (e.g., as descent communities). If objects can behave in ways that are person-like, should they also be treated as persons? Although not all chapters address this question directly, all are conscious of the sense in which museum practice is being transformed by the project of looking for indigenous agency in relation to ethnographic collections and by new ways of conceptualizing museum collections. Over the course of the advanced seminar, the contributors developed a series of ideas that are central to this process of reconceptualizing museum collections in relation to indigenous agency. In the remaining part of this chapter, I outline the theoretical basis

for this new model of museums as heterogeneous assemblages of persons and things.

SPEAKING OF "THINGS": OBJECTS AND THE DISTRIBUTED NATURE OF AGENCY

It is conventional in museum literatures to speak of "objects," with all of the connotations of inanimacy, inertness, and disengagement from social relations that are carried by the term. Here, we speak instead of "things,"[1] "actors," "nonhumans," even "kin." We do so purposefully, not only to connect our work with a broad body of literature in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, material culture studies, and religious studies that is rethinking the relationship between human and nonhuman worlds (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2004; Latour 2004a; Harvey 2005; Serres 2008; see discussion in Olsen 2010) but also to draw attention to the ways in which speaking of objects invokes an underlying idealist philosophy that places emphasis on the separation of matter and mind. To such a way of thinking, objects are defined by the absence of mind or spirit and, by extension, by their inability to embody agency and to act as agents in social relations, interactions that are perceived to be solely the preserve of humans (see Harrison and Rose 2010; Rose 1996, 2004, 2008, 2011; Haber 2009; and Harrison 2012 regarding the indigenous ontological challenge to this position). While the editors and contributors to this volume do not hold a unified materialist position in this regard, all seek to trouble this notion in various ways and to emphasize the agency and affective qualities of things in museums and collections.

The idea that "things" have agency, although increasingly discussed across the social sciences and humanities, perhaps still carries with it a sense of surprise. What do we mean when we say that things can have agency? To answer this question requires a consideration of the nature of agency itself. It is now becoming customary to consider agency not as an individual act of will, but as something that is distributed across collectives. Importantly, these collectives (or "assemblages"; see further discussion below) are defined as composed of both humans and nonhumans and as such are seen to include plants, animals, the environment, and the material world. Although different disciplines and authors draw on different versions of this notion—the "distributed action and cognition" approach of Hutchins (1995); Gell's (1998) and Strathern's (1988) "distributed agency" in anthropological studies of art; the distributed agency that arises from the actor-network framework of ANT (e.g., Latour 2005); the assemblage theory of

Deleuze and Guattari, which sees social life as composed of "semiotic flows, material flows and social flows simultaneously" (2004[1987]:25)—all share a radically transformed notion of social collectives and the ways in which agency is manifested within them. Fundamental to this new notion of "the social" is the dissolution of familiar, modernist dualisms such as "nature" and "culture," "human" and "nonhuman," "social" and "natural" (Latour 1993, 2004a; Law 1994), which are based on an idealist separation of matter and mind. Agency is thus contingent upon and emergent within social collectives, involving both human and nonhuman actors and taking many different forms (see also Joyce and Bennett 2010:4).

Callon (2005:3–5) has provided a summary of these arguments insofar as they relate to the question of agency. He notes that action is a collective property that "naturally overflows" and that, to be recognized as such, agency has to be framed in particular ways. For this reason, agencies are "multiple and diverse" and, depending on how they are framed, can be perceived to be collective or individual, adaptive or reflexive, interested or disinterested. These agencies are distributed among collectives that include humans, their bodies, the technologies they employ, and the natural world that surrounds them. These collectives are arranged in specific ways, and agency is made or remade through the assembling or reassembling of these collectives. Despite employing a "flat" notion of the social (Latour 2005) in which all parts of the collective are potentially involved in the distribution and redistribution of agency, asymmetries between agencies may be considerable; certain arrangements of collectives may be capable of deploying particular forms of agency strategically, and others may have less capacity for free will. Importantly, this allows us to simultaneously level out the priority usually given to humans as actors so that we perceive things and other nonhuman actors as equal players with humans. It also acknowledges the significant inequalities in the implementation of power that usually accompanied the colonial and imperial contexts that were central to the historical development of museum collections (e.g., Bennett 1995, 2004, 2009, 2010; O'Hanlon and Welsch 2000; Thomas 1994; Griffiths 1996; Gosden and Knowles 2001; Coombes 2006; MacKenzie 2010). In relation to this point, it is perhaps helpful to think of "handicaps" to account for "relations of domination-exclusion between agencies, and to interpret behaviors of resistance or recalcitrance" (Callon 2005:4–5). In the same way that individuals can behave in ways that are not always strategic and that might betray mixed allegiances to different, even opposing, interests, so different agencies can be perceived to mix and merge with one another in ways that are not unidirectional or always adaptive. In this book, the authors

often use the term "relations" in preference to "social relations" to emphasize these mixed social/material collectives and the ways in which agency is expressed and distributed across them.

One of the important implications of requalifying or rethinking agency in this way is that it allows the notion of agency to be differentiated from that of "intentionality." Agency shifts from being defined solely in terms of intended action to being seen more simply as *an ability to make a difference*, or to effect change, in a field of relations (Latour 2005:52–53). By privileging only politically intended action as agency, scholars have overlooked the significant role that indigenous people played in the past in determining the nature of ethnographic museum collections (Byrne et al. 2011a). It is possible to argue that at least some indigenous people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may have been employing politically intended action in the selection of particular items for trade and sale with what we as academic researchers would perceive to be a more contemporary sense of the issues surrounding the politics of representation in a global art-culture market (e.g., Harrison 2006). Redefining agency in this way, however, allows us to take account of the many forms of action and interaction that involved asymmetrical colonial power relationships but that nonetheless had an enormous impact on the shape of museum collections (e.g., Torrence 1993, 2000; Gosden and Knowles 2001; Torrence and Clarke 2011; Bell, chapter 5, Torrence and Clarke, chapter 7, and Wingfield, chapter 3, this volume). By stretching the notion of agency beyond that of an explicit political intentionality, we do not deny the importance of intentionality but seek to give dignity and significance to the ways in which indigenous people played active roles in the construction of contemporary museum collections, the traces of which can be read in the evidence of processes of gifting, withholding, buying, trading, and selling (Byrne et al. 2011a). We also see *unintended* consequences as being equally important as *intended* ones. Given that many contemporary museums contain the traces of hundreds of years of collecting, bargaining, trading, stealing, buying, assembling, exhibiting, and educating with ethnographic objects, we believe that the ways in which forms of action in the past have a recursive and at times unintentional influence in the present should also be an important subject of analysis in relation to museum collections. Indeed, the historical changes in emphasis on the volitional agency of indigenous actors are partly explained by the shift from earlier forms of colonial rule to the inclusion of indigenous people in liberal forms of rule, which must produce indigenous agency as a condition for their operation, a point made by Bennett in his contribution (chapter 2) to this volume.

RODNEY HARRISON

APPROACHES TO (RE)ASSEMBLING: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SENSIBILITY

One of the features that links the chapters in this book is that they take a thing-focused approach to exploring the set of relations that surround museums and their collections. Despite the range of disciplinary perspectives in the volume, including sociology, anthropology, and archaeology, we identify this thing-focused approach as drawing on a broadly archaeological sensibility. This term is not used in opposition, for example, to an "anthropological sensibility," but to draw attention to the particular inflections of a thing-focused analytical approach to understanding the field of relations in which museums, things, people, and places are caught up and distributed, as well as the ways in which elements from within this field are deployed in practices of governance and the distribution of power. In doing so, we draw on a series of linked metaphors from archaeology, which help to draw attention to the methods involved in taking such an approach, as well as to the forms of information it could be used to illicit (see Shanks 1992, 2012; Shanks and Witmore 2010 for a discussion of the "archaeological imagination"). We propose that this archaeological sensibility leads to a taphonomic approach to the study of museums and archives, which involves the study of the museum as an archaeological site and an exploration of the processes that led to the formation of the museum collection as an archaeological assemblage (see also Ouzman 2006; Torrence and Clarke 2011). Although this version of an archaeological taphonomy is (explicitly) not primarily concerned with discourse, as a method or approach it shares similarities with Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002[1972]) in the sense in which it allows us to focus on difference and what Deleuze calls "the theory-practice of multiplicities," (2006[1988]:14), a key concern of postcolonial studies in general and postcolonial museum studies in particular (e.g., Sherman 2008; McLean 2008; Lydon and Rizvi 2010). Central to understanding the concept of the archaeological sensibility is the notion of the "assemblage."

ASSEMBLAGES

The authors draw on two distinct notions of the term "assemblage" (see also Harrison 2011b). The first, an archaeological conception, refers to a group of artifacts found in association with one another. For example, in the popular archaeology textbook *The Human Past*, Chris Scarre (2005:721) defines the term "assemblage" as "a group of artifacts occurring together at a particular time and place, representing the sum of human activities in that respect." Implicit in an archaeological use of the term is

the idea of the assemblage as a contemporary construction; that is, the assemblage is created as part of the engagement of an archaeologist's contemporary classificatory gaze with a series of material remains from the past. It arises out of the relationship between past and present and between a contemporary external observer and a set of activities carried out by particular people and particular things in the past (e.g., Shanks 1992; Shanks and McGuire 1996). The formation of an archaeological assemblage is perceived to be the result of both natural and cultural processes, and the study of these archaeological site formation processes is known as "taphonomy." Michael Schiffer (1972, 1976) described the taphonomic processes by which a group of things becomes an archaeological assemblage by way of cultural ("C-transforms") and natural ("N-transforms") transformations. He referred to this as the movement from the systemic context (the original set of relationships between human behaviors and material things) to the archaeological context (the archaeological assemblage studied by the archaeologist). C-transforms include a range of cultural processes such as intentional or nonintentional discard, recycling, or reuse, whereas N-transforms include processes such as biological and chemical weathering and decay. In this model, the rapid burial of artifacts and stable biological and physical processes create more favorable conditions for the reconstruction of past human behavior than do long periods of exposure to cultural and natural transformation processes. We suggest that thinking of the museum as an archaeological field site and considering the taphonomic processes by which the museum collection was assembled raise significant possibilities for new understandings of the processes involved in the formation and maintenance of museum collections.

Archaeologists have not tended to perceive museum collections as assemblages because the collections do not appear in conventional archaeological contexts (the classic context being a buried archaeological deposit) and represent a heterogeneous jumble of things that have come together in complicated ways that are difficult to understand. Indeed, museum collections are often perceived as the very antithesis of archaeological assemblages—out of context, shuffled together in convoluted and confusing ways, and with much accompanying dissolution of "authentic" contextual archaeological information. However, this does not mean that museum collections cannot be studied as field sites (cf. Ouzman 2006; Gosden, Larson, and Petch 2007; Allen and Hamby 2011) and archaeological assemblages in their own right. Indeed, by foregrounding the taphonomic processes that have led objects from their original context of production and use to their residence within museum collections and by thinking about the relationships

between these heterogeneous things, important questions are raised about the nature of museums and their histories, as well as the diverse agencies embodied in their collections. Doing so immediately shifts our perception of what is often presented within the museum as an entirely "natural" coexistence of objects from different times and places to ask, "How did all of these things make their way into this place?" and "What does it mean for them to be assembled together in such a way?" These are important first steps in "unpacking" the museum collection (Byrne et al. 2011a) so that we can begin to think about it critically. Indeed, we would argue that to conceptualize *anything* as an assemblage poses questions regarding its composition, structure, and function. We might extend this metaphor of the assemblage to distinguish between the assemblages that reside in museum storerooms, which are like subsurface archaeological assemblages, and those on display, which we might usefully compare to "surface assemblages" (see also Harrison 2011b). Assemblages in museum storerooms have different forms of visibility; they are more or less accessible to museum staff, but access by the public is controlled and mediated by museum staff as the "experts" (see Byrne, chapter 8, this volume). But we need to be careful of extending this metaphor too far—objects on display are as much a product of historical site formation processes as they are of careful curation and exhibition by museum personnel. This way of approaching museum collections draws on an archaeological sensibility, which involves the literal or metaphorical disassembly (or excavation) of an archaeological site and then its subsequent reassembly (for example, in post-excavation analysis) to understand its structure. Another aspect of this archaeological sensibility involves an awareness of the way in which a number of different people with different skills work at trying to reassemble meaning at the post-excavation stage of an archaeological investigation. As well as drawing *objects* together, a process of assembling and reassembling can draw *people* together in novel ways.

The second notion of the assemblage relies on Manuel de Landa's (2006a; see also J. Bennett 2010) articulation of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory. Deleuze and Guattari (e.g., 2004[1987]) used the term "assemblage" to refer to a series of heterogeneous groupings in which the grouping itself could be distinguished as a whole from the sum of its parts. Importantly, such groupings are mixed, and social or cultural groupings are not distinguished from natural ones (or vice versa). Assemblage theory exists as an alternative to the metaphor of society as a living organism, which dominated social theory throughout the twentieth century. In perceiving social structures as assemblages as opposed to organisms, De

Landa (2006a:11) indicates that the properties of such natural/cultural groupings are not the result of the functions of the components themselves but instead are the product of the exercising of their capacities: they are not an inevitable outcome of the function of their components (i.e., they are not logically necessary), but a product of their particular histories and their relationships with other parts of the assemblage (i.e., they are contingently obligatory). Unlike organisms, assemblages are not governed by a central "nervous system," or head. In this way, agency is distributed across and through the assemblage, as well as within it.

Far from simply being a semantic point, De Landa (2006a) shows how replacing the organismic metaphor with that of an assemblage has a series of implications for the way we study relationships in the past and present. In the first instance, thinking of assemblages as heterogeneous groupings of humans and nonhumans has the effect of flattening the hierarchy of relationships that exists within idealist philosophies, which separate matter and mind. This progresses an aim of the authors of this volume: to address the ways in which things and people are involved in complex, interconnected webs of relationships across time and space. Second, the notion of the assemblage connects with other key theoretical influences on this volume. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour argues that "the social" should not be considered a separate domain, but "the product of a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling" (2005:7). In this way, focusing on the assemblage helps us to concentrate on the formation and reformation of social processes across time and space.

Jane Bennett's (2010) discussion of assemblage theory also draws out another key issue we pursue in this volume. In thinking of museums as heterogeneous sociotechnical and biopolitical assemblages, unlike the organismic metaphor, we are able to identify both relationships of functional flow and more volatile relationships of *friction* and *conflict* (Bennett 2010:23). Perceiving social groupings as organisms tends to emphasize the relationships that lead to the functioning of the whole. Such a model has the potential to produce narratives of indigenous/non-indigenous contact as inevitable, in which the catastrophic clashes that often arose as a result of radically asymmetrical structures of power and unequal forms of authority are muted. The notion of an assemblage allows for relationships that are not necessarily directed toward the functioning of the whole but that might indeed cause a network to stall or even cease functioning. We discuss this concept of friction and its importance in understanding indigenous agency in relation to the museum in more detail below. But for now, it is important to emphasize the ways in which agency is distributed throughout the

assemblage, which functions as a "federation" of actants in which all material and nonmaterial things are participants (J. Bennett 2010). Indeed, Latour speaks of a "parliament of things" (1993:144–145) to describe such collectives.

Where archaeologists have tended to focus on material things to help understand the behavior of people in the past, by defining assemblages as federations or collectives of things *and* people, we suggest that the archaeological sensibility of disassembling and reassembling provides innovative ways of approaching the study of museum collections. Indeed, we suggest that archaeological approaches to the study of human behavior might be conceived as being somewhat like what one sees when looking at a picture of a Rubin vase (see figure 1.1). By focusing on the vase, one overlooks the faces in the background. But thinking of the image as an assemblage enables one to see both the vase and the faces, both the material and the behavioral, or, in our case, the whole federation of human and nonhuman actors. Disassembling and reassembling this collective involves the excavation and study of both the vase *and* the faces, both the object *and* the people. In this way, the thing-focused approach to the study of museum collections outlined by the contributors involves a particular, *archaeological* sensibility.

NETWORKS, MESHWORKS, AND SURFACES

In *Unpacking the Collection* (Byrne et al. 2011a; see also Gosden, Larson, and Petch 2007; Larson, Petch, and Zeitlyn 2007), it was suggested that museums need to be conceptualized simultaneously as *material* and *social* assemblages:

> By saying this, we mean that museums, the people who staff and run them, the objects and the various individuals and processes which led to them being there, those who visit them and those who encounter the objects within them in various media, are all part of complex networks of agency. This agency does not cease with the acquisition of objects from their creator communities, but is ongoing in the material processes of curation and display, and the social processes of visiting, researching, learning and "knowing" things (after Gosden, Larson, and Petch 2007; see also Bennett 2010) which arise from them. (Byrne et al. 2011a:4)

In the study of these heterogeneous groupings of people, institutions, and things, the "network" metaphor became a key concept for understanding the fields of relations in which museums are entangled, drawing on

FIGURE 1.1

The optical illusion known as the Rubin vase. Public domain image created by John Smithson at the Wikipedia project.

actor-network theory (see also Bennett 2009, 2010). I want to pause here to consider arguments put forth by Ingold in defense of a metaphor of "meshwork" (2007a, 2007b, 2008b) in preference to that of the network to describe the relationships between people and things. Ingold (2007a:80) notes that the network metaphor tends to be used to describe a complex of interconnected points rather than a set of interwoven lines. Instead of the lines in a network simply representing movements or entities that "connect the dots," Ingold urges us to consider meshworks as the "lines along which life is lived" and the entanglement of lines, rather than the connecting of points, as the phenomenon by which the mesh is constituted (Ingold 2007a:81). Thus, for Ingold, action (or change) is not the result of agency distributed within a network, but "emerges from the interplay of forces that are conducted along the lines of a meshwork" (2008b:212). This directs us to think about not only the connections between people, things, and institutions but also the medium by which agency is transmitted. In a provocative article in which he places this notion in opposition to actor-network theory, Ingold appears to suggest that in the interaction of biological organism and medium (he gives the example of a fish in water or

a butterfly in air), the medium has no agency: "Air and water are not objects that act. They are material media in which living things are immersed, and are experienced by way of their currents, forces and pressure gradients.… For things to interact, they must be immersed in a kind of force-field set up by the currents of the media that surround them.… Our concept of agency must make allowance for the real complexity of living organisms as opposed to inert matter" (Ingold 2008b:212–213).

Ingold goes on to stress the importance of skilled practice in defining agency, along with a consideration of the qualities of materials themselves (Ingold 2007b; see also Knappett 2007). What is appealing about Ingold's model is the way it forces us to pay attention to the particular qualities of the media through which agency is transmitted—its emphasis on the *mediation* of agency and the particular qualities of material things. Less helpful for us is its apparent denial of the agency of nonbiological entities. However, he expands on this point to suggest that the animacy of things be understood not in terms of the classical definition that has dominated anthropology since Tylor (1920[1871]; see further discussion in Harvey 2005) as the inhabiting of inert matter by spirit, but in terms of the "generative fluxes of the world of materials in which they came into being and continue to subsist.… Things are in life rather than…life [existing]…in things. Things are alive and active not because they are possessed of spirit…but because the substances which they comprise continue to be swept up in circulations of surrounding media that alternatively portent their dissolution or—characteristically with animate beings—ensure their regeneration" (Ingold 2007b:12).

Although the authors in this volume do not share a single position on this issue, we note the usefulness of both the meshwork and network metaphors in directing our attention to the relationships between people, things, and institutions with reference to museum collections. In this introduction, I prefer the term "meshwork," primarily because it seems consistent with Deleuze and Guattari's typologies and De Landa's work (e.g., De Landa 1997, 1998, 2006b; note that these sources are not cited explicitly by Ingold in the works discussed above) and focuses our attention on the mediation of agency and the qualities of the media by which it is transmitted. But we do not wish to lose the radical symmetry of actor-network theory and the way it encourages us to consider the involvement of what might otherwise be defined as inert substances in the transmission of agency throughout the meshwork. Both network and meshwork are useful concepts in relation to the study of ethnographic collections, and contributors employ either or both concepts.

Figure 1.2

A piece of paper twisted to form a Möbius strip. Photograph by Rodney Harrison.

Indeed, over the course of the advanced seminar, while working through the ideas of networks and meshworks and other ways of conceptualizing the complex field of relations in which museums are bound up, we began to think of the Möbius strip as a metaphor for thinking about this field of relations in a constructive way (see figure 1.2). The Möbius strip is a surface with a single side and only one boundary—a shape that is not mathematically orientable but gives the illusion of containing two sides. We started to use the strip as a way of conceptualizing diagrammatically the entangled relationships of various categories that are constructed discursively as opposites within the context of the museum—"indigenous" and "non-indigenous," "people" and "things," "colony" and "metropole," "primitive" and "civilized"—and the ways in which they are actually integrally connected with one another. Although the Möbius strip gives the illusion of these categories as opposites, they are constructed and arise out of a single flat plane, which in our model we interpret as a single field of relations. While we might "see" a single plane, by moving the strip we are able to draw different aspects of the field of relations into view. As in the metaphor of assembling and reassembling, the Möbius strip provides a model in which
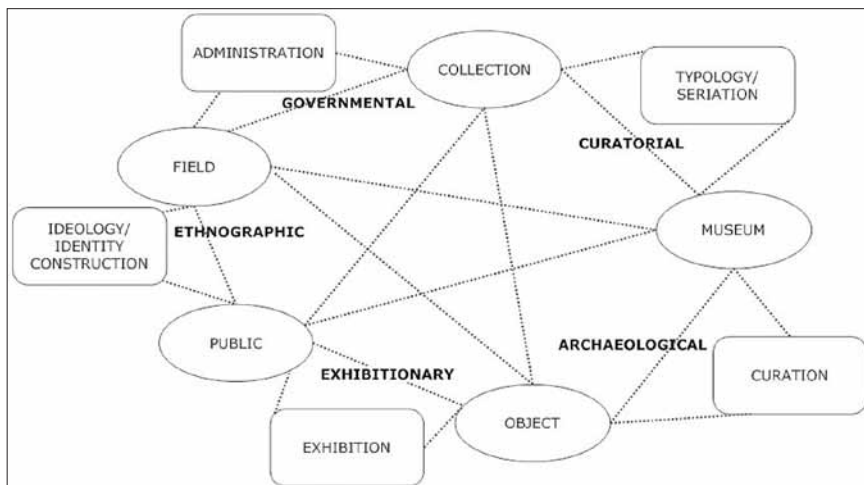
sarpress.sarweb.org

FIGURE 1.3

A schematic diagram representing the field of relations surrounding the museum, including sites of mediation (oval labels) *and various processes and relations that arise from them* (rectangular labels). *Different perspectives or disciplinary points of entry are shown as "cuts" across the meshwork* (unbounded labels). *Drawing by Rodney Harrison.*

different aspects of the field of relations can be viewed in different ways by viewing the field from different angles and at different scales of analysis. One of the important aspects of this volume is that, unlike many anthropological studies of museum material culture, the authors do not seek to distinguish between indigenous producers and non-indigenous consumers but instead consider both as part of a meshwork, which in turn allows them to focus on the whole range of social and material relations that surround museum collections.

The field of relations can be further expressed as a series of points of analytical attention on a schematic circuit, which can be cut in different ways (figure 1.3). These "cuts" represent different points of entry into various sites of mediation of social and material relations. Several of the key nodes in the meshwork have been included in the diagram, delineating field, museum, object, collection, and the public as important nodes and administration, typology/seriation, curation, exhibition, and ideology/identity construction as important social processes that emerge from them. But returning to Ingold's point about meshworks forces us to consider the various ways in which these different relations are mediated and the qualities of the things that mediate them. The different qualities of these media

in turn dictate different approaches to their study, or different disciplinary sensibilities, denoted in the diagram as governmental, curatorial, archaeological, exhibitionary, and ethnographic perspectives. These perspectives represent different ways of looking at, or cutting into, the meshwork to understand the processes at play within it. We have identified the archaeological sensibility as the key perspective for this book, which takes a thing-focused approach to understanding the field of relations surrounding the museum meshwork, but each of the chapters inflects the archaeological sensibility differently and each cuts into the network differently. The locations and fields of practice associated with the museum meshwork are characterized by different forms of relational dynamics and represent sites of mediation of different forms of agency. These locations and fields of practice have different relationships with one another, and all pose questions of indigenous agency in quite different ways.

FRICTION, FLOWS, AND MUSEUM ASSEMBLAGES

When considering the various points of entry into sites of mediation within the museum meshwork, it is important to reflect on governmental processes—listing, collecting, structuring, organizing—and the forms of authority associated with each. Similarly, it is important to consider the impact of these processes on practices and structures of indigenous governance. In this regard, museums and the museological disciplines (archaeology, anthropology, conservation sciences, and natural sciences) should, themselves, be seen as governmental assemblages and mechanisms for assembling and reassembling forms of power and authority (e.g., Bennett 2009, 2010; Ruppert 2009). Institutions are caught up in administrative processes and forms of assembling that are directed at controlling the conduct of people and things, directing our attention toward processes of management and organization. However, the authority that is attributed to museum collections, their modes of collection and presentation, and the forms of knowledge they are used to produce suggest that museums should also be considered governmental assemblages in the way in which they function toward the distribution and control of structures of authority and power. At any of the points in the meshwork, if we make reference to processes of assembling and reassembling, we also speak of forms of expertise and knowledge. Within the museum, as part of its exhibitionary complex (cf. Bennett 1995), these have traditionally been archaeological and anthropological forms of knowledge and expertise. So a key concern becomes exploring how different forms of knowledge and expertise have been involved in the process of assembling and how each has been

employed in relation to processes of governance, particularly the governance of indigenous and local forms of knowledge (cf. Scott 1998).

It is also possible to apply the perspective of assemblage to the ways in which different governmental apparatuses *themselves* assemble—collections, things, people, ideas, techniques, technologies—in programs of governance that are aimed at regulating forms of behavior and conduct (cf. Foucault 2007, 2011; see also Rabinow 1989, 2003; Scott 1995; Pels 1997; Steinmetz 2007). They might address themselves, for example, by way of the exhibitionary complex (Bennett 1995), to the conduct of citizens or through the connection of museums and processes of colonial governance (Bennett 2009, 2010) with indigenous people (who may or may not be addressed as citizens, depending on the individuals, communities, time periods, and nation-states under consideration). Equally important, these governmental processes, by way of schema of classification and organization within the museum, address themselves to the governance of things, in terms of both their definition and the attribution of agency to them in relation to the possible relationships that might exist between them and humans.

I have already suggested that an important aim of this collection is to look critically at the notion of the "contact zone" in describing the field of relations surrounding museums and to consider whether it remains an appropriate metaphor for describing the relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people in the light of the network or meshwork model of relations. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) introduced the notion of the contact zone to overcome the Euro American imperialist, expansionist perspective of the term "frontier zone." She used the term to describe

> the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separate come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations.… [The term] invoke[s] the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term "contact" [she] aim[ed] to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters…[to emphasize] copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (Pratt 1992:6)

The idea of museums as contact zones was popularized by Clifford (1997:188ff.), who used the term to emphasize the ways in which museums are best understood as locally *negotiated* responses to what are portrayed

as dominant, universalizing, hierarchical notions of culture. He suggested that seeing them as such might have the effect of transforming and breaking down these dominant modes, which structure the governmental role of museums. While the authors in this book do not necessarily disagree with this point of view (but see responses by Bennett 1998; Dibley 2005; Boast 2011), this notion of the contact zone might appear to imply that the globalized, transnational flows of things, people, values, and information (cf. Appadurai 1996) are somehow frictionless. We know that the *contact* histories involved in the production and maintenance of such globalized flows have often involved violent *conflicts* and have occurred as the result of vastly unequal power relationships. In our accounts of the field of relations that surround the museum, we feel it is necessary to take note of not only globalized flows but also the sense in which moments of assembling and reassembling within the museum network also often produce friction and conflict (cf. Kratz and Karp 2006). We are mindful here of Anna Tsing's (2005) work on friction and the ethnography of global connection. Tsing argues that friction might be an outcome of the interactions of people and things in a globalized world but is also a creative force in the co-production of culture, which occurs across interactions of difference. The idea of friction acknowledges the fundamentally awkward, unequal, contingent nature of cross-cultural interactions and the relationships between the local and the global. She notes that all forces of globalization are driven by a modernist striving for universals, and it is in this way that her work connects directly with the idea of the museum, a universalizing, modernist institution par excellence (Bennett 1995; Harrison, chapter 4, this volume). The idea of the contact zone could be interpreted as a space in which contact and cross-cultural flow are unimpeded. Tsing (2005) shows how conflict and friction are not simply about slowing down social and material flows but are generative of new relations and are necessary to keeping both global and local flows in motion.

These ideas connect with the authors' shared conception of the museum meshwork in several productive ways. In the first place, the metaphor of friction seems to better describe the messy, sticky engagements that characterize the historical exercising of agency (indigenous and otherwise) and the contemporary processes of cross-cultural contact and collaboration within museum meshworks.

> It is important to learn about the collaborations through which knowledge is made and maintained.... Through the friction of such collaborations, global conservation projects—like other

> forms of travelling knowledge—gain their shape. [But] col-
> laboration is not a simple sharing of information. There is no
> reason to assume that collaborators share common goals.…
> Overlapping but discrepant forms of cosmopolitanism may
> inform contributors, allowing them to converse—but across dif-
> ference.… Globally circulating knowledge creates new gaps even
> as it grows through the frictions of encounter. (Tsing 2005:13)

Second, the idea of friction emerges from a consideration of the proper-
ties of the parts of the meshwork by which agency is mediated. This assumes
that the rate and effect of the flow of information, material, and ideas will
not be equal but will depend on the media by which the flow is transmitted.
In turning our attention to the connections between people, things, corpo-
rations, places, institutions, and techniques of government, we also need to
be mindful of the qualities of the "stuff" that connects them and the ways
in which flow and friction themselves are creative and generative, leading
to processes of reassembling within the museum meshwork.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

While all of the contributions to this volume address a broad, overlap-
ping set of themes relating to ethnographic museum collections and indig-
enous agency, the chapters have been organized into three parts to reflect
their emphases on one or more important sets of questions raised in this
introduction.

The chapters in part I, "Museum Networks and the Distribution of
Agency," are concerned primarily with the nature of museums and eth-
nographic collections as assemblages and the ways in which agency can be
traced in relation to the processes of their formation and ongoing mainte-
nance. Tony Bennett (chapter 2) draws on Latour's discussion of museums
as centers of (and for) the collection and calculation of "immutable and
combinable mobiles" (1987:227) and, as Bennett puts it, "objects and texts
that, no matter how old they are or how far distant from the sites at which
they were collected, are 'conveniently at hand and combinable at will'"
and the ways in which the processes of assembling them within the late
nineteenth- and early twentieth-century museum led to the distribution of
"new forms of agency across the relations between museum and field, metrop-
olis and colony, colonizer and colonized, scientist and subjects, and collector
and collected." This is a point also developed by Harrison (chapter 4) in his
comparison of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropologi-
cal museum collections and late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century

lists of intangible heritage. Importantly, he discusses the ways in which both forms of collection are linked by the desire to assemble and govern cultures "at risk." A consideration of the processes involved in the assembling and reassembling of collections and the significance of the spaces "in between" the museum and the field informs Chris Wingfield's (chapter 3) reflection on the London Missionary Society "museum," a mobile collection that circulated in the mid- to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between London and various sites of missionary activity, with objects intended to serve both anthropological and proselytizing functions. Importantly, he highlights the process of dispersal and the movement of ethnographic objects between the field and multiple centers of missionary activity (themselves alternative sites of collection and calculation) as being as significant as field collecting itself, significantly deepening our understanding of the formation processes of museum collections.

Part II, "Indigenous Strategies and Museum Collections," focuses more specifically on the ways in which indigenous agency might be traced in relation to the formation of historic museum collections. Joshua A. Bell (chapter 5) explores the intersecting agencies of Papuans and field collectors during the 1928 US Department of Agriculture Sugarcane Expedition to New Guinea. In a sensitive and nuanced exploration of the various objects and records that were collected, he demonstrates how the expedition created distinct artifacts and networks, the narratives about which fed into and helped sustain colonial imaginaries of New Guinea as timeless and primitive, while simultaneously exploring the ways in which colonial science, exploration, and authority were made to articulate with indigenous New Guinean worldviews, interests, and cosmopolitics. Tracing the agency of an individual person through the contributions she made to a particular collection, Gwyneira Isaac (chapter 6) explores the objects and records relating to the Zuni *lhamana* We'wha' in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, produced during We'wha's six-month visit to DC in 1886 with the anthropological couple Colonel James and Matilda Coxe Stevenson. Isaac shows how the structure of museum catalogs serves to dissolve the identities of individual indigenous collaborators such as We'wha through its emphasis on the classification of artifacts by tribal and geographical grouping. Nonetheless, Isaac's chapter demonstrates how the identities of individuals and the details of the objects they produced might be retraced and the objects reunited with the identities of their makers. Robin Torrence and Anne Clarke (chapter 7) are similarly concerned with discovering traces of indigenous agency in museum collections, primarily in relation to processes of anthropological field collection, through a

focus on the structure of museum collections themselves. Modeling their study on archaeological approaches to assemblage analysis and treating the museum explicitly as an archaeological field site, the authors attempt to identify strategies adopted by indigenous source communities to create, sustain, or avoid social interaction with European field collectors, and they consider how these strategies might have altered indigenous people's notions of themselves and others in a globalizing, colonial world.

The chapters in the third and final part of the book, "Objects, Agency, and the Curatorial Responsibility," focus principally on contemporary relationships between indigenous people and museums and the curatorial responsibilities that arise from a serious consideration of indigenous ontologies in relation to the agency of things. Sarah Byrne (chapter 8) recounts how new collaborative practices that emerged during the British Museum's Melanesia Project suggested new logics for the organization and storage of Melanesian artifacts within the museum, reflecting on the ways in which the application of an archaeological sensibility to the museum storeroom and a conceptualization of museum collections as assemblages could potentially open up new ways of thinking about the formation and location of ethnographic collections and the processes of collaboration they undergo. By drawing attention to the museum storeroom as the primary context in which ethnographic objects are found and by positing ways of exploring it as an archaeological site that has been created and structured in very particular ways, she suggests that curators have a responsibility to facilitate new collaborative strategies for working with source communities that acknowledge the agency of things. In a comment on Byrne's chapter, Evelyn Tetehu, one of the Solomon Islander women involved in the Melanesia Project at the British Museum, reiterates how an artifact's social function can significantly influence the ways in which it should be managed, and she discusses the ongoing social implications of engaging indigenous communities in such collaborations. This theme is discussed further by Chantal Knowles (chapter 9), who shows how ambiguous objects that are not able to be categorized using conventional museum categories can help trouble those categories. She draws attention to such categories as an invention of museum practice and also points out the ways in which museum objects are far more commonly the result of mixed agencies and makers than might generally be assumed. The collaborative reconstruction of the Māori waka taua in the National Museums Scotland draws into question a range of museological practices through the discussion of a shared practice, which drew on Māori approaches to conservation informed by a tradition of continual use, repair, and renewal. Finally, the implications of adopting Hopi ontologies

for reshaping contemporary curatorial practices are explored by Kelley Hays-Gilpin and Ramson Lomatewama (chapter 10). In embracing a view of artifacts as animate and as having reciprocal relationships with humans (and one another) in terms of their life force, personhood, emotions, kin, life cycle, and function—which derives from Hopi cosmology but which can be seen as shared by other indigenous groups throughout the world—they suggest that museums might shift their emphasis to living people and the reciprocal relationships between museum staff and representatives from source communities, the relationships between artifacts and individuals, and the relations of artifacts with one another. This would have positive benefits not only for source communities but also for the recognition and re-ignition of the relationships that animate the things in museum collections.

CONCLUSION

I will conclude with some thoughts about how the ideas developed in this book might inform everyday museum practices. While it is well known that museums employ anthropologists, archaeologists, and non-indigenous curators alongside indigenous curators and consultants, in practice, a range of individuals work behind the scenes, such as exhibit designers, marketing managers, educational outreach staff, and cafeteria workers, who are perhaps far less likely to engage directly with the sorts of theoretical concepts developed in a book like this one. However, the themes developed here can and should articulate directly with the everyday practices of museum workers and goers and not just with those of museum curators or professorial staff, in that we call for a fundamental reorganization and sharing of authority between source communities, museum staff, and members of the museums' various publics, as well as museum objects and exhibits. It is not only the curator or consultant or source community member who interacts with the objects in collections and determines the ways in which they are managed and displayed, but a whole range of museum staff, visitors, and other agents within the museum meshwork. All might be encouraged to view their interactions with objects as more dialogical (cf. Harrison 2012), to consider objects as possible agents and interlocutors in their own right, and to establish practices that treat objects more democratically. Similarly, all museum staff and visitors might be encouraged to consider their own obligations, which arise as a result of an acknowledgment of this shift in modes of authority within the museum. As Schultz (2011) has argued, it is important to involve the public—as much as source communities—in collaborations if the new shared modes of authority within the museum are to be communicated.

In the introduction to the edited volume *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Sherry Turkle (2007:4) urges us to reconsider Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1966) suggestion that we explore bricolage, the creative combination and recombination of a particular series of things, as a spur to new knowledge. The processes of reassembling the museum collection described by the authors in this volume owe much to the creative potential that Lévi-Strauss identified as a latent property of assemblages of people and things. These chapters go some way toward shifting the dominant orientation of critical museum studies away from issues of difference and representation and toward a more nuanced engagement with a broader range of concerns, including the exercising of authority and agency, the forms in which they manifest, and the materials and relations by which they are mediated within ethnographic museum collections, understood broadly as sociotechnical and biopolitical assemblages. Although the book focuses particularly on indigenous agency and the forms in which it has emerged in relation to the museum, its themes have broad relevance for museum and material culture studies more generally, drawing on an archaeological sensibility to argue the need for greater sensitivity to the affective qualities of things and the relationships in which humans and objects are bound up throughout the world. Similarly, the theoretical and methodological issues discussed here go beyond museums to raise questions relevant to the applied disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, and material culture studies more generally. Certainly, the fundamental implication of many of these chapters is that increased respect for material things follows from acknowledgment not only that the makers were "real people" but also that the objects themselves have been (and continue to be) involved in significant historical and contemporary relationships with a variety of other human and nonhuman actors. Museums are already adopting special practices for material thought to have important "sacred" or "spiritual" significance, and the chapters suggest that these practices, which acknowledge the dialogue between humans and things, might gainfully be extended to other museum objects more generally.

An important, growing literature parallel to the one explored here considers the relationship between science museums and climate change (e.g., Cameron 2010, 2011a, 2011b), for example, and is similarly beginning to emphasize the responsibilities and obligations that arise from a consideration of heritage as something produced in the dialogical relationships between human and nonhuman actors, who work together to curate the past in the present to collectively build a common world (Dibley 2011; see also Harrison and Rose 2010; Harrison 2012; and Meskell 2010:854 in

relation to heritage more generally). Museum collections not only are spaces of display but also provide objects to think with, through, and in relation to—objects that continue to exercise their own forms of agency in a complex mesh of relations with those who have made, traded, received, collected, curated, worked with, and viewed them in the past and do so in the present. Recognizing these various forms of agency has profound implications for curatorial practices, implying not only an active engagement of people and things but also a curatorial responsibility that arises from the material, historical, and political weight of museum objects. Acknowledging this curatorial responsibility has the potential to transform our relationships with museums and their varied communities of interest in the twenty-first century.

Acknowledgments

Note

1. Gosden (2004) makes a similar distinction between "objects" and "things."