The Role of Community Museums in Museum Decolonization Discourse

Sophie Walsh
University of Pennsylvania

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Abstract
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Keywords
decolonization, museum, community museum, Maya, Belize, cultural heritage

Disciplines
Anthropology

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THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY MUSEUMS IN MUSEUM DECOLONIZATION

DISCOURSE

By

Sophie Walsh

In

Anthropology

Submitted to the

Department of Anthropology

University of Pennsylvania

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Richard M. Leventhal

2022
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Introduction
The release of the movie Black Panther, a Marvel film highlighting the comic book character Black Panther, in 2018 shook the museum world as it brought colonization in museums to the big screen. Making $1.344 billion in the box office with continued streaming on multiple platforms, the movie had a large audience (“Black Panther”, n.d.). One scene in particular changed the way people viewed museums entirely. Inside the British Museum, the character Erik Killmonger asks an African gallery curator in reference to artifacts on display, “How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price or did they take it, like they took everything else?” (Coogler 2018). The objects the character is referring to are sculptures from the kingdom of Benin, known as the Benin Bronzes, which were forcibly taken by British troops in 1897 from the West African kingdom of Benin located in modern-day Nigeria (Jones 2021). This scene represents a shift in the way people view museum galleries and it has fueled the growing discontent with the colonial histories of such institutions.
Museums have become the center of decolonization discourse. When visitors enter museum grounds, many come with questions about where the objects came from and how they ended up on display. As places of public education and cultural stewardship, museums need to have answers to these questions, even if it comes at the expense of exposing their colonial pasts.

Colonization in museums takes on various forms. It is infused into the daily life of a museum and it can be seen through museum galleries, collections, staff, research expeditions, and more. In the modern-day, encyclopedic museums, or universal museums that display objects from cultures around the world, are aware of how colonialism has affected their institutions and some are actively seeking ways to address these effects. Encyclopedic museums draw a lot of attention for their decolonial efforts due to their prominence in society but they are not the only museum institutions that are enacting change. Community museums, or museums that are built and run by a particular community with a shared identity, are pushing decolonial discourse. These smaller, community-run institutions use the museum structure to give communities direct control over their cultural heritage and the narrative that surrounds it. It allows people to address needs within their community and to represent their shared identity to a world that favors the opinions of people with PhDs over the lived experiences of community members.

To understand the impact of community-run museums, this research looks at community museums in Mexico and Central America, specifically in the village of Indian Creek, Belize. Located in southern Belize in the Toledo District, Indian Creek is home to Maya activists and villagers that want to build a community museum to represent their identity. Amidst a fight for the creation of a Maya homeland, the community in Indian Creek wants to build a museum to express their cultural heritage outside of the influence of colonial narratives about Maya history. Researchers from around the world have traveled to Belize to conduct archaeological and
ethnographic research and, for decades, their perspectives on Maya heritage have been circulated around the globe as the ‘true’ history of the Maya. Community museum projects, like the one in Indian Creek, challenge these narratives and use oral tradition and memory to tell Maya history from the perspectives of contemporary Maya-speaking people.

The original plan for this research was to conduct an ethnographic study of the process of building the community museum in Indian Creek. Multiple visits to Belize were planned to speak with community members and collect field data on current planning for the museum. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these visits were not possible. Additionally, due to the current political climate in Belize, I was unable to connect virtually with anyone in Indian Creek for this research. To adapt to the circumstances, my research changed to allow me to study community museums from afar by focusing on the success of other community museums in the region and the implications of these projects on the proposed museum in Indian Creek.

Due to the widespread influence of colonization, the term is very complicated to study. As a white individual, researching colonization is a privilege because I have not lived through many of the abominable experiences that are discussed within this paper. For me, this work is the result of my own research interest and desire to explore an important discourse within the modern museum world. Colonization, however, is much more than a research topic. Contemporary indigenous and descendant communities still face trauma caused by colonization and this research is conducted with reverence for these communities.

Within this research, colonization and decolonization will be defined to directly clarify how these terms will be used within this context. Using these definitions, decolonization efforts in mainstream museums will be evaluated to discuss where these initiatives enact real change and where they fall short in holding museums accountable. Two examples of decolonization
practice from the Penn Museum will be examined to determine how these initiatives present themselves in daily museum life. The prominence of the Penn Museum as a research institution with a university affiliation puts this museum in a prominent position in decolonial discourse. In the second portion of this research, community museums and their impact will be discussed in the context of decolonial efforts of encyclopedic museums. How community museums differ in their practice compared to larger, mainstream museums highlights the various benefits to these community-run institutions. Plans for the construction of a community museum in Indian Creek, Belize brings this research further to look at the process of creating the vision for these spaces.

A community-centered approach that brings indigenous and descendant communities out of the periphery and to the center of decolonial discussion ultimately supports the mission of decolonization of both large and small museums around the world.

**Part One: Coloniality and Museums**

**Defining Colonization and Decolonization**

Colonization is a term that is growing in popularity not only in academic discourse but also within politics and the media. The extensive effects of colonialism make it a complex term that can have many applications depending on the context of its discussion. Thus, before defining how colonization presents itself within the museum context, this research aims to first define colonization and decolonization as they are understood collectively.

At its core, colonization is both a physical and intangible force that creates and dictates the structure of relationships between groups of people. It is rooted in power and the implementation of hierarchies that favor one group over others (Kohn and Reddy 2017). Within its tangible understanding, colonization takes the form of economic domination, land settlement, resource exploitation, religious evangelism, and/or political control. These practices are the
systems that can be identified as physical manifestations of colonization but alone they do not embody the whole idea of colonialism.

Although not as apparent as the tangible aspects of colonization, the intangible side of colonization is influential because it controls how people think and act. Colonialization in the intangible sense dictates how people view their heritage and position in the world. Colonial meanings are instilled into cultural objects and histories so that they center around the colonizer. Within hierarchies that marginalize certain groups of people, the cultural heritage of the groups forced into the periphery becomes more representative of the views of the centralized group. Narratives that benefit colonial agendas are therefore prioritized in colonial societies. The normalization of colonial narratives also causes marginalized groups to view their heritage through a colonial lens. This reinforces the oppressive nature of colonial narratives and it traps groups forced into the periphery to stay within their colonially designated hierarchy. In the past and the present, intangible colonization facilitates hierarchies by creating narratives that justify the superiority of one group over another.

A comprehensive discussion of colonization is not complete without the acknowledgment of the severe colonial impact of European expansion and settlement. It is often the first thought that comes to mind when discussing colonization and this is largely due to its significant impact both in the past and the present. The Europeans were certainly not the first colonizers of the world, but, in the modern-day, the influence of European colonization takes precedence as the image of the ‘West’ has been idealized. Western European countries as well as the United States are the full embodiment of the ‘West’ as they maintain the highest influence in the economy, the military, and global politics. Western countries distinguish themselves by othering those that do not fit their cultural standards. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* describes this othering through the
distinguishing of “The Orient” versus the “The Occident”. Such labels are used by Western
countries to dominate and control “The Orient” by implementing hierarchies between the two
(Said 1978, 10-11). ‘Western’ ideologies are taught as the ideal way of living although they
represent the thoughts and ideas of a limited group of people. The upholding of the West is
something that still happens today and it can best be understood as modern-day colonialism.

Together, the tangible and intangible manifestations of colonialism affect communities
around the world both indigenous and non-indigenous. Consideration of national borders, drawn
and enforced by colonial powers, provides a clear example of colonialism in action, both in the
physical and intangible sense. National borders drawn across the continent of Africa serve as an
example of the harm of such colonial acts. In Mika Vähäkangas’s (2021) “Navigating ethnicity,
nationalism and Pan-Africanism – Kimbanguists, identity and colonial borders”, he explains that
colonial powers are responsible for the creation of national borders that do not reflect the natural
interpersonal relationships between cultural, linguistic, or religious groups that occupy the
landscape. Vähäkangas describes these borders as acts of violence that are responsible for
conflict between groups of people with different identities as they force them to live within the
same nation when previously they had the freedom to expand and contract on the land as needed
(Vähäkangas 2021).

In the intangible sense, national borders that are drawn by colonial powers implement
new shared identities onto the people that are placed within the borders. This can lead to forced
assimilation and cultural homogenization as different groups of people attempt to adapt to new
conditions. An imposed sense of ‘unity’ is created that is used to discourage minority cultures,
languages, and religions (Vähäkangas 2021). Narratives that push shared national identity can
lead to the continuation of colonial forces that wish to eradicate the cultural and political systems
that fall outside of their definition of normal. Therefore, borders drawn through colonial means facilitate an ‘othering’ of one group that leads to their oppression at the hands of colonization.

Decolonization can be interpreted as a reframing in the context of the effects of colonization. Decolonial action can be viewed along a scale that is defined by the degree to which the action holds colonial powers accountable. In the tangible sense, it is not necessarily possible to remove the hierarchical, colonial power since the influence of colonialism spans across generations and into various components of everyday life. Whole cultures and communities are transformed by colonization and often do not look the same as the way they were during the first contact with their colonizers. Decolonization should therefore be thought of in the context of reframing rather than trying to achieve a return back to the time of pre-colonization. This reframing of the world would allow indigenous and descendant communities to be more critical of colonial systems. It would create dialogue within this reframing that pulls non-Western ideologies out of the periphery and puts them at the center of knowledge creation and dissemination. Decolonization aims to give indigenous voices the space to control their own land, people, and history even though the oppressive nature of colonialism still exists in society.

Within these definitions, it is worthwhile to note that there is an ongoing discourse about the interchangeability of the terms ‘imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’. Some scholars chose to differentiate the two for the purposes of in-depth analysis or interpretation. For example, Kohn and Reddy see domination as a similarity between the two terms but colonialism is related to the control of territory and nations while imperialism describes how this control is created through political and economic structures (Kohn and Reddy 2017). For this research, which seeks to discuss the effects of colonization and how community-centric practice can contribute to
decolonization, ‘colonialism’ and ‘imperialism’ will be used interchangeably. This research uses the terms as a pair to fully capture the tangible and intangible effects of colonization and to facilitate a discussion on how to reframe modern colonial systems.

**Museums at the Center of Decolonization Discourse**

The focus of this research centers around museums not only because they are often at the center of criticism regarding colonization, but also because many museums are actively trying to incorporate decolonization into their everyday practice.

Museums are teaching institutions. They are responsible for the dissemination of the knowledge they generate through research and other academic endeavors. As educational institutions, museums can be seen as the bridge between the academic world and the public. By filling their galleries with artifacts from around the world, museums bring the many cultures and histories of people from many miles away to a certain city or town where the museum is located. School children, tourists, and local residents all walk through their local museum’s exhibits and each person is introduced to information about other cultures. A relationship of trust that the museum is presenting the ‘truth’ is therefore present between visitors and the museum's curators as they read and interact with the museum’s exhibits.

In addition to their role as educational spaces, larger, mainstream museums are starting to mirror the nature of smaller, community-lead museums by serving as areas of community gathering and collaboration (Lonetree 2012, 22). As programs and committees are formed to bring in a more diverse set of voices and opinions, museum spaces are going beyond the informational aspects of their exhibits to include modern-day people who can speak to their own cultural heritage. The physical space that these galleries occupy has the potential to be the ideal environment for community members to meet and share ideas surrounding culture and history.
Museums are playing an ever more important role in community development and therefore should put decolonization efforts as their main focus. These institutions have a window of opportunity to not only address their colonial pasts but to go beyond transparency to open the door for representation and inclusion.

By having control over the story that is told to their visitors, museums put themselves at the center of decolonization discourse. The nature of museums puts them in a position of educational authority. Both larger and smaller museums have an established line of communication to the public that gives them a platform to implement change. Mainstream museums, particularly those that are well-funded, have the resources to change current colonial narratives. These resources can be used to transform galleries that facilitate colonial understandings of heritage, hire a more diverse staff, create programs geared towards bringing community members into the museum space and implement other such initiatives that will be discussed in more detail further on in this research. Although helpful, plentiful resources are not necessary for museums to enact meaningful change. The societal standing of encyclopedic museums and similar institutions naturally draws the critical eye of the public and makes it their responsibility to respond to calls for decolonization.

In the broad scope of everyday life, colonization is an issue that extends into all of the major parts of society. Although it is a concept that was created within the academic world, the concept of colonization is perceived worldwide as more people are confronted with the deep-rooted effects of colonization. The mistreatment of indigenous communities around the world by colonial oppressors has had lasting effects on these populations as they currently face the generational trauma that has defined their daily lives.
Trying to understand colonization and current decolonization efforts in the broad sense would lead a researcher into a very complex and large project that may take years to complete. This reasoning alone is enough to understand the magnitude of colonization’s effects. A specific focus on museums allows for a more in-depth investigation of the way colonization has manifested itself into modern society.

**Inherent Coloniality of Museums**

Acts such as transparency, repatriation, and increased diversity amongst museum staff are some examples among many of practices that museums are referring to as decolonization. Their application and widespread usage come with the assumption that museums can be decolonized and that there is an end goal to these actions. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019), the author of *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, argues that decolonization in museums is not possible due to their inherent coloniality. The origins of these institutions as well as the core mission of museums, to tell stories through objects, makes them fundamentally imperial.

Comparable to the shutter of a camera, Azoulay argues that museums, like a photographer, assume that the objects of the world were intended to be turned into works of art and put on display. Often without the consent of the communities these objects originate from, museums take objects away from the people that created them and put them behind glass. Azoulay argues that the violence associated with the removal of objects from their communities is excused when museums feed into “the right to see” or the supposed right of people to learn and experience different cultures through the exhibition of that culture’s objects in museums. By putting the objects on display, museums create a differentiation between the people that are creating the exhibit and the people that are represented in the exhibit. This divide shows on one side the person that is taking and appropriating the objects and, on the other, the people who are
being used for their resources and labor. Azoulay describes this as the “imperial shutter” where the theoretical operator of the camera is the one that takes and benefits from the product and the people on the other side of the lens get their lives exploited at the expense of the photographer. In the event that an object is stolen or looted, as was common in the early days of museums, the inherent coloniality of museums makes it acceptable for them to turn that looted object into an art piece in the supposed interest of the public (Azoulay 2019, 4-6). With museums leading the narrative of what these objects are and what they represent, they leave out the violence and destruction that colonialism created and continues to facilitate in the modern day.

In the very nature in which museums were created, their purpose served colonial power. Azoulay argues that museums make visible colonial destruction and portray this violence as acceptable. The worldview that museums display centers around reconstructing the world through the eyes of imperialists, giving colonial voices jurisdiction over how people understand the world around them. Azoulay is particularly critical of repatriation and how colonial institutions such as museums think that simply returning objects to descendant communities repairs the damage that was done by colonialism. Putting the focus on objects distracts from the extreme destruction to communities, lands, and societies that colonialism caused and Azoulay sees repatriation as a mere avoidance of responsibility by museums (Azoulay 2019, 7-8). Decolonization calls for accountability for the actions of colonizers and the inherent coloniality of museums makes it difficult for decolonization practices to effectively take place without the acknowledgment of colonial origins and systems.

Putting objects on display in the interest of public knowledge is a concept that Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) argues for in his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Appiah discusses repatriation and how laws surrounding the return of cultural objects should be
navigated in the modern-day. Within repatriation discussions, Appiah points out that some objects that are currently being evaluated for potential return belong to cultural groups that no longer remain amongst current populations. Appiah sees the focus on biological descent as a distraction, and in the case of objects that belong to populations that no longer exist, he believes these objects are better considered the property of humanity and their location should be based on where they can best be preserved. Also, Appiah emphasizes that modern-day nationalism did not exist during the creation or acquisition of many of the objects in museum collections. In Appiah’s discussion, he argues that the repatriation of objects of cultural patrimony prevents the shared responsibility of preserving these objects. Appiah believes this does more societal harm than good. While Azoulay argues that the public is wrongly prioritized when it comes to displaying cultural objects for the supposed right for people to learn, Appiah puts the responsibility of preserving cultural heritage as “human culture” on whichever institutions are willing to properly care for these objects. Appiah believes that the context within which these objects were found is more important than the objects themselves. He argues that the context, rather than cultural patrimony, should be prioritized more in laws that regulate the exchange of cultural objects (Appiah 2006, 119-120, 122-124).

Appiah does not directly address the inherent coloniality that Azoulay discusses in her book, but within his argument, Appiah favors the institutions that Azoulay criticizes for their ability to preserve objects and educate the public about their associated cultural heritage. Azoulay’s argument centers around the experiences of indigenous and descendant communities as the subjects of colonial interest. Appiah, in contrast, does not focus on the communities themselves, but rather discusses the criteria for repatriation and the societal value of keeping cultural objects open and available to public viewing. He, therefore, favors holding objects
within the Western context to support his argument for cultural heritage as a cosmopolitan construct that should be perceived by all (Appiah, 2006, 123).

I disagree with Appiah and think that the mere ability of mainstream, encyclopedic museums to preserve objects of cultural patrimony does not serve as a viable argument against the colonial practices of these institutions. Coloniality in museums continues to harm modern indigenous, descendant, and/or minority communities that have had their cultural heritage exploited for centuries, and favoring these institutions for their resources overlooks this harm for what Appiah sees as the “greater good” of preservation. By grouping objects from different cultures into one “human culture”, Appiah does not acknowledge the cultural distinctness that plays a role in the identities of the communities that claim those objects as a part of their heritage. Properly addressing the inherent coloniality of institutions like museums requires researchers to evaluate the intangible ways that colonization has affected indigenous and descendant communities. This includes rejecting the cultural homogenization of a term like “human culture” in favor of respecting the distinct shared identities of cultures from communities around the world.

Colonization and Decolonization in Museums

The focus of this research centers around decolonization in the modern museum context and how colonialism is represented amongst the many galleries and exhibits in museums. Even though Azoulay thinks total decolonization of institutions like museums is not possible, she acknowledges that certain actions and practices can be used to alleviate the control of coloniality in these spaces as well as make them more inviting to groups marginalized by colonialism (Azoulay 2019, 12-13).
Encyclopedic museums, or “universal” museums that host an array of collections from around the world, have more recently been called to the forefront of discussions surrounding colonality as most of the origins of their collections have complicated and unethical histories that have not previously been acknowledged. Some of these museums house sacred religious objects, funerary objects, or even human remains, among many other objects that hold major significance within the heritage of certain cultures. These artifacts and remains often stand as modern-day symbols of colonialism for many indigenous and descendant communities as they view their heritage through pieces of glass. The story being told about these objects often does not come from the indigenous or descendant communities themselves, but rather, the narrative stems from the research interests of the curator and the museum. Colonialism within the museum setting, therefore, takes on many forms, including the control of the objects and control of the narrative surrounding the objects.

**The Power of Colonialism in Museums**

Conversations on colonialism in museums often take a heavy focus on the physical objects that make up museum collections. When museums create programs to decolonize, this fixation on the more tangible side of colonization often diverts attention away from the more internal, emotional, and generational effects of coloniality. This can be seen in the way museums control the narrative surrounding objects on display. Problematic displays that show past indigenous people as ‘uncivilized’ or ‘stagnant’ create narratives that feed into the knowledge of the public directly. Some museums frame indigenous groups as ‘dying’ races that belong to the past even though many of these groups still exist today (Lonetree 2012, 30). By failing to incorporate contemporary indigenous populations into the curation of exhibits that display indigenous cultural heritage, museums facilitate modern-day colonialism within their galleries.
Stemming from the early days of colonial explorers and the private collections of ‘curiosities’ of the Enlightenment, museums have generally been organized and maintained by wealthy, white individuals. With white, often male, explorers being funded by museums to conduct excavations and ethnographic work around the world, museum collections quickly became filled with artifacts from various cultures and beliefs. These objects came from the natural world as well as the daily lives of the communities they were taken from, representing cooking objects, tools, religious items, and more. These expeditions were made possible through wealthy, white male donors who decided which objects they wanted to display. The Metropolitan Museum of Art serves as a prime example with their main early contributor being J.P. Morgan, a wealthy banker with an affinity for art and culture. Morgan donated thousands of dollars to The Metropolitan Museum of Art and, after his passing, his private collection was given to The Met. Morgan’s philanthropy can be seen as an example of the influence of large donors as Morgan’s opinion largely dictated The Met’s collections and displays during its early years. The donations Morgan made reflected his worldly interests and, as the president of The Met from 1904-1913, his personal taste in art and culture shaped The Met’s exhibits. Additionally, Morgan actively sought to bring objects and artwork that would otherwise be inaccessible to the general American public to The Met where visitors could view these works for free (Panero 2020; Strouse 2000, 4, 36, 41-43). Morgan’s role, therefore, facilitates the paternalistic nature of museums where large donors bestow upon the public the ability to see art and culture. A distinction is made between the donor and the public that elevates the status of the donor as hierarchically superior. This contributes to the coloniality of museums.

While these objects were of interest to wealthy elites in their original contexts, once they were brought into the museum, their roles changed. Suddenly these objects that were once used
for important religious ceremonies or simply used every day to process food were being put on display. Outside of their original context, museum curators are tasked with connecting these objects to the people that made them in a way that is clear yet engaging to museum visitors.

Located in major cities and spaces, museums host visitors with drastically different backgrounds that may or may not have any previous knowledge about the cultures they see in museum galleries. Therefore, museums must make the understanding of these artifacts and human remains accessible to the public. Between the public and the museum, a sense of trust is built and visitors to museums, especially in the early days of their conception, took what they saw and read in museums as the historical ‘truth’. This was particularly problematic as museums displayed works of scientific racism where indigenous groups were presented as ‘primitive’ and ‘less civilized’ compared to white individuals. The bodies of indigenous and racial minorities were collected to fuel pseudoscience investigations into how differences in the size of the cranium or other body parts could prove white superiority (Procopio 2019). Such narratives were incredibly oppressive to the identities of non-white racial groups in the past and the harm of these stories continues into the modern-day. Therefore, the lack of representation amongst current museum staff and curators maintains the harms of the colonial origins of museums. By employing mostly white individuals, museums are continuing to amplify the voice of only one group of people while they claim to represent the voices of many.

**The Current State of Museums: Decolonial Exercises**

*Transparency*

Within the museum context, decolonization takes on many forms, both big and small. Acknowledgment of the colonial means in which artifacts were brought to the museum is often seen as the first step in museum decolonization. There is some debate that questions if
transparency is an act of decolonization but it is clear that transparency starts a conversation about decolonization that encourages visitors to discuss the importance of museums in the broad scheme of decolonial discourse. Transparency serves as a public acknowledgment of a colonial past and its rising usage in museums around the world reflects the increased demand from the public for museums to decolonize their collections. Although transparency requires museums to publicly recognize their colonial history, it does little to hold these institutions accountable. A placard declaring that a particular artifact was taken without permission or taken during a time of violent war adds to the life history of the object but, in terms of decolonizing, the object remains on display and the museum continues to profit from its exhibit. These objects are continually featured on advertisements for the museum and used to raise its profile to attract more visitors who will pay the admission fee to see the objects. It is certainly monumental to see an acknowledgment that a certain set of objects or human remains were stolen or brought to the museum through unethical means, but the acknowledgment is a response to public demands and it serves more as a publicity stunt than a well-intentioned act of decolonization.

Land Acknowledgments

Another practice that has become more popular in museums, both encyclopedic and community-based, is the posting of a land acknowledgment either at the front entrance or somewhere in the museum’s galleries. Land acknowledgments recognize the Native American or indigenous tribes that occupied the land on which the building or museum is located prior to European settlement in North and Central America. Often these statements call for reverence and respect to these groups of people who had their land taken from them by force and some acknowledgments call for the return of this land to the Native people that once inhabited it. These postings recognize current Native American and indigenous tribes by indicating that the
land should be given back to these descendant communities. Land acknowledgments also frame the museum in a colonial context and serve as ways for visitors to engage in decolonial discussions within museums.

Although land acknowledgments bring colonialism in museums to the visitors' attention, they are highly performative. Spoken at the beginning of formal meetings, included in email signatures, posted on walls, and more, land acknowledgments are perhaps one of the easiest ways for a person or an organization to ‘absolve’ themselves of responsibility (Sobo, Lambert, and Lambert 2021). They are largely common in the modern-day and one might even go as far to say that they are overused.

Decolonization is not something that is meant to be easy. Land acknowledgments, whether well intentioned or not, oversimplify an issue that has been going on for decades. Collective suffering and generational trauma caused by the dispossession of land from Native American and indigenous communities is not something that can be remedied by a statement that explains that a certain building or institution is located on stolen land. In reality, many land acknowledgments do not even mention this trauma caused by land dispossession. This leads many current Native American tribes and communities to feel that their trauma is denied by these institutions (Lambert, Sobo, and Lambert 2021). Some land acknowledgments call for restitution, but often do not say exactly how they are going to achieve such claims. For these statements to be effective as a means of decolonization, they must avoid self-congratulation and instead provide concrete methods of change that benefit the Native American and indigenous communities that are affected (Wood 2021). Although land acknowledgments can be seen as inherently performative, especially in the nature to which they are presented, reframing these statements to include more self-criticism, higher levels of respect for Native populations, and
active donations or projects that work towards restitution could turn them into viable tools for
decolonization practice.

**Repatriation**

Once the colonial history of artifacts or human remains are made known, whether it be through museum transparency or personal research projects, the next step of decolonization would be a call for the repatriation of these objects or remains. The return of artifacts and/or human remains is a highly emotional process for the descendant communities involved. Allowing sacred objects and the remains of ancestors to go back into the hands of descendant communities is a monumental occurrence and it is an event that is filled with a profound sadness for the many years of lost possession and separation. Museums that house these important objects, particularly museums in the United States that have Native American artifacts and human remains in their collections, are responsible for identifying and reaching out to descendant communities to offer repatriation. Specifically, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) mandates the repatriation of Native American, Native Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian artifacts and human remains in the U.S. and this act will be discussed further in the next section. Repatriation is a slow process and it is often drawn out over many years. Returning objects is a step further than transparency on the decolonization scale, but it is not the ultimate way that museums can address their colonial origins and compensate for the decades of damage to indigenous communities who have been forced to live without important cultural objects due to colonial museums.

➢ *The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)*

Repatriation in the United States often occurs in compliance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) which calls for the return of Native
American, Native Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony (“Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (US National Park Service)” 2019). All federally funded museums and institutions that hold Native American, Native Alaskan, and/or Native Hawaiian human remains or objects in the specified categories are required to comply with NAGPRA. Failing to comply, as the act states, would result in the issuing of a civil penalty, which often takes the form of fines to the institution responsible (“Civil Penalties - Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (US National Park Service)” 2020). However, many museums and other federally funded institutions that fall within the categories of NAGPRA have yet to comply. NAGPRA is enforced by the National Park Service, an institution that, as of 2010, is itself non-compliant with NAGPRA’s policies. The area in which The National Park Service fails to comply is completing and distributing inventory summaries of all of the Native American, Native Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian human remains or objects within their institution (American Alliance of Museums 2010). As the ones responsible for enforcing NAGPRA, The National Park Service sets a poor example and permits the continued noncompliance of many museums and other federally funded institutions.

In the 2020 Annual NAGPRA Program Report, it is recorded that since NAGPRA’s enactment in 1990, 199,933 human remains have been reported under NAGPRA with 62,294 of these remains being culturally affiliated and eligible for repatriation and 20,782 not culturally affiliated but still eligible for repatriation. This leaves 116,857 human remains, both culturally affiliated and not affiliated, still under consultation. For funerary objects, 1,782,409 culturally affiliated and not affiliated objects have gone through NAGPRA and are eligible for repatriation. According to the report, 777,982 funerary objects, both culturally affiliated and not affiliated, are
still undergoing the consultation process. The report boasts that they have not received any letters of failed museum or federally funded institution compliance from Native American tribes or Native Hawaiian organizations that have made valid repatriation claims. An increase in NAGPRA’s inventory during 2020 resulted in the addition of 2,653 individuals of reported human remains in the United States that are eligible for consultation, cultural affiliation (if possible), and eventual repatriation (National Park Service and U.S. Department of the Interior 2020). The statistics listed in this report reflect the ongoing relationships that museums and other federally funded institutions have created with Native American tribes, Native Alaskan tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations in response to the enactment of NAGPRA. Repatriation is a slow process that requires heavy amounts of research to provide cultural affiliation but NAGPRA has made significant steps to return important objects and human remains to the people that value them for their relevance and meaning within their cultural heritage.

➢ The Proposed African American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (AAGPRA) and What NAGPRA Means for Non-Native American Communities

Created specifically for Indigenous American and Native Hawaiian descendant communities, NAGPRA has created discussions across races and ethnicities to question how repatriation works for other descendant communities who find valuable objects of their cultural heritage behind museum glass. For example, there has been recent advocacy for the creation of an African American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (AAGPRA) which would prohibit the sale and transfer of African American human remains and require a committee to oversee the handling and claims over these remains. The proposed AAGPRA would also require museums and federally funded institutions to consult with descendant communities in any decisions pertaining to African American human remains. Many of the African American human remains
that are present in these institutions today were enslaved people and the descendants of these individuals want the remains of their ancestors to be reburied and taken out of museum collections (Dunnavant, Justinvil, and Colwell 2021).

In terms of decolonization, it is important to question if acts like NAGPRA are the goal for other communities who are interested in repatriation or if NAGPRA is a first step in the decolonization movement. NAGPRA federally requires these institutions to communicate with indigenous and descendant communities with the goal of repatriation, but decolonization practice calls into question whether these acts can occur internally from the institutions themselves and not as federally mandated laws. If museums are not able to hold themselves accountable, then laws like NAGPRA are necessary to decolonize museum collections through repatriation. A lack of self-accountability would also mean that new laws such as the AAGPRA may be required to properly protect African American human remains still currently in museum collections. Additionally, where objects go after repatriation, whether directly to descendant communities or to the nation that these communities live within, is a great cause of contention. Returning artifacts to a nation, especially a nation that does not foster a good relationship with the indigenous populations within its borders, does not achieve the decolonial aspect of repatriation as objects are simply going from one form of colonial control to another. The physical return of objects to descendant communities makes repatriation an act of decolonization, but the disregard for the way the separation from these human remains and objects has caused pain and oppression for indigenous and descendant communities makes repatriation a preliminary step in the broad scope of decolonization discourse.

*Increased Diversity Amongst Museum Staff*
In response to predominantly white museum curators and staff, recent decolonization efforts surrounding the control of the narrative of artifacts in museums have focused on getting more people from descendant and minority communities into the professional museum world. Pipeline programs that prioritize black, indigenous people of color, or BIPOC, are currently being used as a form of decolonization. These institutions believe that hiring a more diverse staff will lead to better representation within museums as discussions about the histories and stories of artifacts are carried out amongst museum employees. The Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) recently implemented an internship program that provides a 12-week paid museum internship to undergraduate students from underrepresented backgrounds. Within this program, the AAMD hopes the paid position will allow more diverse undergraduate students to explore potential careers in the museum field (Angeleti 2018). A similar program at the Penn Museum is another example of this form of decolonization in practice. Penn’s Summer Internship Program consists of a nine-week paid internship within one of the many departments within the Penn Museum. Applicants that are part of African American, Latinx, Native American, or other underrepresented minority communities are encouraged to apply to the internship program and their applications are prioritized in the overall review (“Summer Internship Program”, n.d.). These programs respond to the AAMD’s call to end unpaid internships in museums because they believe the unpaid positions were preventing a more diverse applicant pool (Sutton 2019). By inviting people from groups that are generally underrepresented in the museum sphere, these internship programs hope to pave the way for future museum professionals to come from an array of ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Unfortunately, progress within this area is slow. In order to change the demographics of the professional world, students from indigenous or minority communities are required to pass
through the very academic institutions that represent the colonial past that these decolonization efforts are attempting to diminish. These new students are prompted to learn academic jargon that stems from the colonial perspective and to participate in set systems of learning that reflect past colonial research. It is therefore important to recognize that putting indigenous and other racially underrepresented individuals into museum spaces is not enough to change the colonial nature of these institutions.

Decolonization requires thorough self-reflection, analysis, and action on the part of the museums that are responsible for facilitating colonial operations. The responsibility of transforming these institutions should not fall onto the shoulders of indigenous and minority communities since they are the ones that experience the greatest effects of colonization daily. Reframing colonial structures requires open conversation and evaluation of how colonization has affected a particular institution or system. The term ‘decolonization’ may be becoming more normalized in modern society due to media attention, but the magnitude of the topic should not be lost amongst mainstream usage. Although decolonial action may not be easy for places like museums, it is the next step in bringing ideas from decolonial discussion to life.

An example of increased diversity in museums can be seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art where Patrica Marroquin Norby, a descendant of the Purépecha indigenous group, was hired as the museum’s first-ever curator of Native American art in 2019. An artist herself, Norby is responsible for organizing The Met’s new Indigenous art program which will take a collaborative approach to tell the stories of the many indigenous art pieces in The Met’s collections. Having also recently served as the assistant director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in New York, Norby’s role as the main curator of the Indigenous art program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art serves as an example of how
representation can be used to put the control of the narrative back into the hands of those who identify with that specific cultural heritage. Within the museum context, however, it must be acknowledged that Norby is still doing the work of a curator and putting indigenous art behind glass. The manner in which Norby approaches this project is what changes the overall message of the exhibit. Norby is dedicated to taking a collaborative approach where she is in constant communication with descendant communities and tribes during the whole curation process (Cascone and Pierce 2020). It is within the next few years that the museum world will start to be operated by people who represent the diverse world and cultures these encyclopedic museums display in their various galleries.

Collaboration

As museums prepare to curate more displays representing the cultural heritage of indigenous and descendant communities, it has become more common for curators to take a collaborative approach to the creation and arrangement of these displays. The increase in collaboration practice is largely due to Native American activism that has pushed for the inclusion of indigenous voices in exhibits that represent their heritage and objects (Lonetree 2012, 17). In theory, by allowing indigenous and descendant communities to contribute to the curation of museum exhibits, collaboration efforts are seen as a way to give control of the narrative back to the communities to which they are representing. Open communication and discussion between museum curators and current indigenous communities are also seen as a way to get more indigenous people interested in entering a museum profession. By allowing indigenous people and descendant communities to provide input on these exhibits, museums make their collections more accessible and representative of the people that created them.
The reality of collaborative practice is often less monumental than it initially seems. Collaboration often takes the form of consultation, where museum curators reach out to current indigenous or descendant communities and ask their opinion on the plans for a particular exhibit. Usually, by the time curators reach out to have discussions about the exhibit with indigenous and descendant communities, the content and design of the exhibit are already formed by curators that do not belong to the communities the display represents. Additionally, viewing indigenous people as consultants to these museum projects implies that the input of these communities is either accepted or denied according to the authority of the museum and the head curator. A better, more respectful, step towards decolonization through indigenous and descendant community involvement would be to employ Native partners, where community members have more of a say in the content and design of the overall exhibit.

Native partnerships are explained in detail by Joe Horse Capture (2015) in “Native People Have a Story to Tell – Their Own”, where Horse Capture critiques the process of creating “The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky” exhibit at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Met employed no Native partners for the project but relied solely on Native consultants for community outreach and inclusion. Horse Capture, who was asked to contribute to the exhibition catalog, immediately refused to participate or interact with the exhibit upon hearing that there were no Native partners on the project. According to Horse Capture, many Native people qualify as partners for such a project and The Met’s reliance on consultation only represents the performative and self-serving practices that museums use to make themselves appear decolonial and inclusive (Horse Capture 2015).

By not incorporating Native people as partners on exhibition projects, museums continue to make mistakes in terms of representing indigenous objects. Horse Capture highlights several
examples of museums that either display objects that Native communities have requested not to be displayed or museums that do not afford certain objects the proper respect that they deserve within the Native context. If Native people were given the opportunity to co-curate projects, rather than simply consult on these projects, many of these errors could be avoided. Partnerships would also allow for further indigenous and descendant community involvement which would bring more people from these groups into the museum space. Horse Capture even offers a solution if museums find themselves in a position where they cannot find Native partners for an exhibit. He suggests using the opportunity of creating the exhibit as a way to train a Native intern or student in the curational process. This would therefore pave the way for this Native person to become a Native partner in the future. An exhibit that represents a certain community or group of communities also should be shared with the people it represents and Horse Capture suggests sending a catalog of the exhibit to indigenous communities all across North America. This dissemination of knowledge expands the museum’s reach and gives Native people the opportunity to react and respond to these exhibitions. It also draws more Native people to the museum field where they can one day have jurisdiction over their own objects of cultural heritage (Horse Capture 2015). Horse Capture offers explicit solutions to the criticism that he lists in his article and it is Native American activism such as this that drives the collaboration movement in museums.

Indigenous people and members of descendant communities should be employed as partners by museums to aid in the content curation process. Museums have become over-reliant on the easy nature of consultation which allows them to accept or deny indigenous or descendant community input. The accountability aspect that embodies what it means to decolonize is lost
when the decisions for an exhibit representing people deeply affected by colonialism are given to the museum and not to the indigenous communities the exhibit represents.

*Using Decolonization as an ‘Empowering’ Force*

Within decolonization discourse, some people choose to focus on the negative while others try to turn the discussion into a more positive one. For example, Amy Lonetree (2012) writes in her book *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, that decolonization is about ‘empowerment’ and it often requires heavy amounts of reflection and auto-criticism for indigenous communities seeking to be a part of the movement. For decolonization efforts to be effective, there has to be a shared vision that change can occur to transform colonial systems. Lonetree’s argument frames decolonization in a different light.

People are highly critical of institutions like museums that have omitted the colonial histories of the artifacts in their collection to protect their public images. The question often becomes, “how could you do this?” as people become enraged at the idea of past villages and towns being robbed of their most precious religious and historical objects only for these objects to be sitting in a Western museum many years later. Although much of this anger is justified, Lonetree challenges those within decolonization movements to foster positivity amongst their communities. Lonetree suggests a revival of tribal languages and traditions which would allow indigenous tribes to share in the joy of community while also working towards change (Lonetree 2012, 25-26). Decolonization efforts require great patience and strength as communities that are most affected by colonization are forced to face their own traumas to heal society for future generations.

However, the term ‘empowerment’ has a complex meaning, and it is used here within the context of Lonetree’s book as her own word choice. Lonetree’s argument is unusual in
decolonization discourse for many understandable reasons. Asking communities that have been oppressed and affected deeply by dispossession to be patient and optimistic is a difficult argument. The term ‘empowerment’ carries with it paternalistic connotations as it implies the imparting of power from a dominant group onto communities marginalized by colonization. These implications are problematic as they still centralize groups that benefit from colonialism and give them the hierarchical power to bestow ‘empowerment’ onto other groups. A better way to interpret Lonetree’s argument would be to view the community-run initiatives of contemporary indigenous and descendant groups as an internal sense of power. The authority over this power, therefore, comes from within and not from outside colonial forces. This works well with Lonetree’s argument for the reclamation of tradition by the community and how this can facilitate an internal generation of power. Therefore, the term ‘empowerment’ is out of place in decolonial discussion. Self-criticism and reflection should fall onto the institutions that facilitate colonial agendas so that proper accountability and action can take place.

Examples of Decolonial Initiatives at the Penn Museum

Having discussed general decolonial practice across encyclopedic museums, this research will now explore two specific examples of decolonization at the Penn Museum in Philadelphia. This focus on the Penn Museum is due to the author’s proximity and access to the museum as well as the unique nature of these two examples.

As a part of the University of Pennsylvania, the Penn Museum hails itself as a research institution that funds archaeological and anthropological investigation around the world. With its distinct placement in West Philadelphia, the Penn Museum is known for its representation of cultures from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Mediterranean. The museum houses over a million artifacts which are either in storage or on display in their galleries. A priority is placed on
using the museum as an educational space not only for undergraduate students at the University of Pennsylvania but also for K-12 students in the Philadelphia area (Penn Museum, n.d.). It is within this context that the museum has begun to incorporate decolonial practices, such as transparency, collaboration, and others previously discussed. An evaluation of the Penn Museum’s new Africa Galleries and their educational program Global Guides will aid in gaining a better understanding of decolonial practice in action.

The Africa Galleries

The Penn Museum’s Africa Galleries takes a transparent approach as it includes the stories of how the objects were brought to the museum. This includes objects that were stolen or looted by past explorers and private collectors. Incorporating the colonial means in which these objects found their way to the Penn Museum begins a discussion of decolonization within the gallery. Dr. Tukufu Zuberi, the lead curator for the Africa Galleries, sees the exhibits as a way to acknowledge the colonial history of the museum while reshaping the memories associated with the objects to be more representative of culture outside of colonial narratives (García 2019). The previous Africa Gallery at the Penn Museum used to be in a large room with an assortment of objects from the museum's Africa collection. In an interview with Kate Quinn, the former Director of Exhibitions at the Penn Museum, she noted that the Africa gallery was the most frequently visited by students and that the set up of the old gallery did not properly create a cohesive story about the objects for visitors (Quinn, 2022). Using visitor feedback and community advisory boards, the new Africa Galleries were created and opened to the public in 2019 (Global Philadelphia Association 2011). The galleries feature a variety of cultural heritage from countries in Africa including religious objects, jewelry, clothing, artwork, weaponry, and more.
Referring back to previous critiques of the practice of transparency, it is critical to view the Penn Museum’s Africa Galleries within the context of accountability. The galleries certainly address the issue of colonialism within the museum as an institution and the placards that provide the history of the objects include the reality of how these objects ended up at the Penn Museum. However, while the museum acknowledges the unethical means by which the objects were brought to the museum, they continue to profit off of their display in the new galleries. This critique does not call for the repatriation of all of the objects in the Africa Collection but rather questions the role of transparency if the colonial institution itself continues to benefit from the display of the objects. Decolonial discussion is brought into the exhibit in a subtle way which requires visitors to carefully read the additional information that is included alongside the cultural significance of each object. In the broader context of the Penn Museum as a whole, the Africa Galleries are particularly distinct from the museum’s Egyptian Gallery. By not drawing the connection between the new Africa Galleries and the Egyptian Gallery, a disconnection between the two is created. Egypt is presented with little to no connection to Africa or contemporary populations and the transparency that is used in the Africa Collection does not extend into the Egyptian Galleries. As a whole, the new Africa Galleries indirectly address the inherent coloniality of institutions like the Penn Museum, but they do not present definitive action on how the museum is going to reframe their colonial history with the benefit of affected modern-day communities in mind.

The Global Guides Program

In 2015, with the help of the Barra Foundation, the Penn Museum created the Global Guides program for recent immigrants to the United States to connect with objects from their cultural heritage and present their personal associations with the objects to museum visitors. The
program founders, Kevin Schott and Ellen Owens, coordinated with HIAS Pennsylvania and the Nationalities Service Center in Philadelphia to find people that may be interested in working as a Global Guide (Schott, 2022). Presentations for the program began in the Middle Eastern Gallery and have since extended into the Asia, Africa, and Mexico and Central American galleries (“Global Guides”, n.d.). In interviews with six current Global Guides, praise for the program's ability to connect contemporary people to ancient artifacts while engaging the public was common amongst the interviewees. Most of the guides felt that the program was an example of decolonization because it allowed them to educate the public through their own narratives about their cultural heritage. For example, a guide in the Mexico and Central American Gallery was particularly glad to explain that the metate on display is still used today in modern forms to grind grain and spices (interview with a Global Guide, Philadelphia, February 2, 2022). The Global Guides enhance the information available in the galleries by adding personal connection and meaning to the objects on display while also representing their cultural identity with their own stories and histories.

The program has been a large success overall and visitors have still been able to experience the wonders of the Global Guides through virtual tours throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Within decolonial discourse, the Global Guides Program is best seen as an example of collaboration and increased racial and ethnic representation amongst museum staff. Through collaboration with immigrant communities in Philadelphia, the program works to reshape the narrative surrounding the Penn Museum’s collections. However, the program is practicing this collaboration retrospectively and it pushes for an interpretation of already curated exhibits by modern-day people who share in the cultural heritage of a particular gallery.
Collaboration after the curation of these exhibits is an example of the museum's coloniality. It is easier to bring in community involvement after the process of curation since it does not require the hiring of community partners and curators. The museum’s role in the Global Guides Program lacks the accountability necessary to make the program a proper act of decolonization. Additionally, some of the guides in the program expressed that they felt limited within the museum space to speak only on their own heritage. At meetings with other museum staff and curators, they were only requested for their opinion on the galleries that represented their ethnicity while white members in the room gave their thoughts on all of the galleries (interview with a Global Guide, Philadelphia, February 2, 2022). This issue does not reflect on the program itself but is rather more representative of museum spaces in general due to the colonial nature of their creation and operation. Increased diversity amongst museum staff should not mean that because someone belongs to a racial or ethnic minority that they should be limited to only having a valid opinion about their heritage. The Global Guides Program reflects decolonial efforts to incorporate contemporary people into exhibits that represent the past but more accountability and inclusivity is needed in the museum space to reframe its colonial context.

*Notes on the Africa Galleries and The Global Guides Program Sections*

The critiques presented above are not meant to be discouraging or targeted directly at the Penn Museum. Decolonization, as it is interpreted within this research, is intended as an ongoing conversation that constantly works towards reframing colonization in all aspects of society. The Africa Galleries and the Global Guides Program prompt open discussion and critique of coloniality and decolonization and the focus on these two examples allows for improvement and growth within similar institutions. Hearing critiques of programs that were created with good
intentions is sometimes uncomfortable for some readers but decolonial discourse in general challenges the comfort of colonial norms and pushes society to address issues that may be difficult to talk about. The critiques presented above are centered around accountability in colonial institutions and although they may not be what people want to discuss about these examples, they are necessary to make progress in decolonization.

**Part Two: Community Museums and Maya Heritage in Indian Creek, Belize**

**Role of Community Museums**

Encyclopedic museums are not the only institutions implementing decolonial practices. Community or tribal museums serve as major examples of decolonization but their methods look very different than those practiced by encyclopedic museums. According to Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales (2006b) in “The Power of Self-Interpretation: Ideas on Starting a Community Museum”, the main difference between larger, universal museums and community museums is that community museums operate as locally-run organizations that directly address community needs while encyclopedic museums are conglomerate institutions that are generally run by a board of directors with different backgrounds. Community museums involve indigenous and descendant communities from the very start. The community owns the museum and they ultimately have the jurisdiction over how their museum space is produced (Camarena and Morales 2006b, 77-78). In Erin Barnes’s (2008) “Mexico’s National Program of Community Museums: Local Patrimonies in a Multicultural Mexico”, she sees community museums as a way to challenge the object-based and aesthetic-focused exhibits of mainstream museums. Barnes describes the social value of community museums and how they serve as vital educational tools for future generations to cultivate a shared identity. While Barnes's definition embodies much of Camarena and Morales’s views on the preservation of heritage, Barnes goes further to say that
community museums are distinct from other museum types due to their purpose. By giving community members a space to discuss their heritage and create goals for the community based on their shared identity, Barnes argues that community museums are places of social change (Barnes 2008, 213-214). Community museums are responses to globalization and they give communities a platform to represent their identities to the world. These spaces are used as educational tools as well as centers of tourism and community gathering for both local and international audiences.

Within the decolonization of the museum field, community museums present a unique approach to cultural representation by having communities organize these spaces from the beginning. Community museums can be seen as directly addressing and preventing many of the colonial mistakes made by encyclopedic museums who employ non-indigenous curators and also fail to properly collaborate with indigenous communities. Although community museums operate within the colonial framework of a museum, the community-driven nature of these institutions makes them a crucial point of study within research on decolonization. As spaces of cultural representation and preservation, tourism, and global connection, community museums serve an important role for both indigenous communities and the rest of the world.

*Community Museums in the Age of Globalization*

The globalization of the world continues to have major impacts on society, particularly for indigenous communities. With domestic markets being flooded with foreign goods, unemployment and underemployment rates in indigenous communities have been on the rise. Globalization is responsible for a major increase in migration which has led to cultural homogenization and the depletion of local cultural identity. However, globalization has caused an increase in global communication which has allowed the influence of indigenous art and material
culture to spread around the world (Camarena and Morales 2006a, 323). Living in a globalized world requires indigenous communities to address their own identity and how they want to be represented on the global stage.

Community museums are used as a tool by indigenous communities to situate themselves in “global civil society” (Camarena and Morales 2006a, 342). Driven by the community, these museums serve as a form of self-governance, where community members collectively agree on how they should represent their shared cultural heritage (Camarena and Morales 2016, 33). Exhibits in community museums contain content that is curated by the people who the objects represent. The stories that are told alongside the objects come from community members and therefore serve as important examples of indigenous people taking control of their global narrative.

Tourism

The dissemination of indigenous curated narratives is mainly facilitated through both local and global tourism. Globalization allows community museums to have a widespread impact as indigenous communities have increased access to global communication tools and resources as well as a global audience of foreign travelers. This linkage of indigenous communities to wealthy societies facilitates the spread of interest in indigenous design and art. As people from these wealthier societies interact with more indigenous art, they create a demand for these art pieces on the global market, therefore increasing revenue for local artists (Camarena and Morales 2006a, 323). These indigenous art pieces are an important source of income for community artisans but they also serve as representations of indigenous culture and identity.

Community museums are gathering places for indigenous art and culture. By having a community museum open and available to the public, tourists are given a destination to learn and
immerse themselves in the local indigenous culture. In addition to time, tourists also spend money in community museums. To generate a profit, community museums, like most museums, often require an admission fee. Some communities also choose to sell local artwork at these sites to give tourists an opportunity to collect a souvenir. The Shan-Dany museum in Oaxaca is an example of how income for local artisans can increase due to the creation of a community museum. By incorporating the history and practice of textile weaving into the Shan Dany’s museum exhibits, local artisans in the community noticed an increased interest in their work. The museum even hosts a traveling exhibit of textile artists where members of the community travel across Mexico and the United States to showcase and sell their art pieces (Cohen 2001, 274, 276). Therefore, in addition to allowing communities to represent their heritage, community museums also stimulate economic growth and expansion. Increasing revenue should not be the only motivating factor for building a community museum, since the monetary benefits are relatively low. However, community museums give tourists a place to spend money and buy local products when, without the museum, these tourists would simply pass through without directly benefiting the community in any way.

Particularly in Mexico and Central America where countries have a heavy focus on the income generated by tourism, indigenous communities often think that tourism is controlled on the national level and is therefore inaccessible (Ardren 2002, 385). Community museums challenge this conventional system and give these communities the opportunity to use tourism to their own benefit. Through the creation of community museums, indigenous and descendant communities are given jurisdiction over their cultural heritage as these communities get to decide how they present their identity to tourists. Tourism is a valuable tool in a globalized world and
community museums give communities the opportunity to control the narratives about their identity and heritage.

*Community Museums as Educational Spaces*

Within their mission to curate indigenous stories into museum exhibits, community museums also work to preserve their cultural history. The information available in community museums is a resource not only for foreign tourists but also for local community members. Both past and present history is documented in the exhibits of community museums and this is particularly important for younger community members to learn about their heritage.

Many community museums use the space as an opportunity to discuss the colonial practices of outside researchers who have previously exploited the area for archaeological excavation or ethnographic analysis. Community museums at Chunchucmil and Kochol in Yucatán, Mexico can be seen as examples of this educational practice in action. The community museum projects in Chunchucmil and Kochol directly challenge the role of the outside researcher as they call for more community involvement during archaeological investigation and excavation. These museums involve community members of all ages as they include programs for first to fifth graders to learn about the archaeology of important Maya heritage sites (Ardren 2002, 386-387). Engagement of the community in the actual research of these archaeological sites creates a more open dialogue about how these investigations are conducted in terms of respecting the local indigenous culture. Building a community museum in conjunction with this collaboration makes it an educational experience for community members. In the younger generations, this education has the potential to inspire future generations of indigenous archaeologists and anthropologists who could provide the needed indigenous voices and opinions in these academic disciplines.
Educational programs at community museums also move beyond the focus on archaeological sites. The emphasis on archaeological research and education, particularly for communities in Mexico and Central America, comes from outside researchers who see these sites as valuable places for investigation. Archaeological sites provide key insights into the past through material culture, but local communities should not feel required to focus their educational practice on archaeology simply because outside researchers place a higher level of importance on these sites. An example of an educational program that reinterprets the focus on archaeology can be seen in an archaeology museum in a Creole community in Northern Belize. Located in the village of Crooked Tree, this community museum has created a curriculum that teaches Creole history to tourists and in local schools to address the conflicting identities of the people within their community. Due to displacement by European powers through the slave trade, many people with African ancestry live in Belize today. The educational curriculum created by the community in Crooked Tree seeks to provide a comprehensive history of Belize by incorporating the stories of Creole people and it explains how this adds to the cultural diversity of the country as it is seen today (Harrison-Buck and Clarke-Vivier 2020, 414-415, 426-427).

Community museums harness the power of education to disseminate knowledge about identity and representation to local and international audiences. The usage of educational programs in community museums exemplifies how museum spaces can be used to influence public opinion and thought for the purposes of decolonization.

*Intended Audience – Who are Community Museums For?*

In the creation of community museums, organizers are faced with crafting the vision of the museum and thinking about their intended audience. As discussed in the previous
subsections, community museums can be used as places for tourists to spend time in the community or they can be used as educational spaces for local community members to learn about their past.

Curating exhibits for tourists requires the museum to cater to what tourists want to see and experience. A key part of the tourism industry is making sure that tourists enjoy themselves and have positive experiences during their time of travel. In a community museum setting, particularly for communities that are located in more rural areas, this would mean creating exhibits that would appeal to an international audience seeking adventure and cultural immersion. Tourists who are choosing to take a trip away from the beaches on the coast into more rural areas are likely to want a more culture-focused experience and community museums can provide tourists with a wealth of cultural information.

When community museums are built to serve as an educational community space, the exhibits are much more interactive and they appeal to a local audience rather than an international one. This means that the museum can incorporate local language and customs more easily since their intended audience is already familiar with the culture they are representing. Additionally, museums built for local community members can create programs aimed at educating local children about community heritage. Programs that center around archaeological sites and research, such as at community museums in Chunchucmil and Kochol in Yucatán, Mexico, work directly with young community members to inspire the next generation of potential archaeologists (Ardren 2002, 386). Community museums with an intended local audience allow community members to teach their own stories and narratives about their heritage to ensure that this knowledge is passed on to future generations.
Current discussions in community museums are questioning if it is possible to incorporate both audiences into one museum. The international tourist audience and the local educational audience both present benefits to the community respectively, but incorporating both audiences into one museum is challenging. With increased communication amongst community museum organizers and higher access to museum development resources, perhaps a model that incorporates both audiences will soon be available. Ultimately, the audience for a community museum depends on the vision of the community and it should reflect the needs that they want to address. If possible, a community museum that incorporates both audiences would be incredibly beneficial and I am optimistic that such an institution will be available in the near future.

Community Museum Networks

The widespread usage of community museums as a means of representing indigenous identity has also led to the creation of networks amongst these institutions. Increased access to global communication tools and resources has promoted the connection of community museum project leaders. For example, the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca (UMCO) was created to bring indigenous groups from around the region together to share and discuss ideas around community museums. Through community-to-community collaboration, organizations such as the UMCO can amplify the impact of their community museums. The UMCO’s first projects surrounded creating procedures for traveling exhibits both regionally and internationally, as well as discussing proper formatting for museum brochures and radio programs. Through the formation of a training center, the UMCO has been able to create four new community museums by holding workshops that included participants from communities that belong to the union, other communities in Oaxaca outside of the union, and communities from other states in Mexico. The efforts of the UMCO have paved the way for helping communities start their own museums
without the need for government intervention. By putting the focus on group collaboration and support, networks like the UMCO embody the community-driven aspect of community museums and give the groups that are creating these museums the tools they need to succeed (Camarena and Morales 2006a, 336, 338-339). These networks represent a collective effort to combat the harmful effects of globalization by using the tools that globalization has made available to indigenous communities.

With the success it had on the regional and national level, the UMCO has also established its networks on the international level. Including countries such as the United States, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, the UMCO shared their tools and knowledge with communities that wanted to create community museums in their home cities, towns, or villages (Camarena and Morales 2006a, 340). Large networks like the one facilitated by the UMCO represent the widespread desire for self-representation within communities around the world. These communities want to be able to tell their own stories and control the objects that are put on display for public viewing. The positive reception of these networks on the global level reflects both the increased need for support in starting community museums and also the strong desire for more community museums in general.

*Issues with State Intervention in Community Museums*

State or national intervention is an issue that can arise within the construction and planning of a community museum. When the state inserts itself into the planning for community museums, the voices of community members can become secondary to the opinions of the state. For example, the involvement of the Mexican state in the creation of the Shan-Dany Community Museum in Santa Ana del Valle showed how the state sought to use the museum for its own interest at the expense of the self-representation of community members. In the case of
Shan-Dany, the state gave support to early community leaders and project developers until the project reached a certain point where they then decided to withdraw their support. This sent the community into disarray and disorganization until the state reinserted its support to appear as the ‘saviors’ of the project and elect new leaders (Cohen 2001, 277). State intervention can therefore inhibit the progress of community organizers and prevent these museums from being constructed in a timely manner.

The influence of state intervention on community museum projects can also force these communities to cater their narratives to the western audience that the state desires to attract. This is particularly destructive to the community museum process as it forces project leaders to create representations of their indigenous identity within a ‘modernist aesthetic’. Within the state’s demands, communities are told that the rural, agricultural nature of their identity does not fit into the ‘clean’, ‘naturalized’ aesthetic that the state wants to portray (Cohen 2001, 277). It is therefore crucial that community museum projects are community-run in a way that prioritizes community opinions and ideas. State intervention into the community museum process directly works against the community-driven aspect of these projects and generally, it should be avoided if possible.

**Maya Heritage and Identity**

Before discussing Maya heritage as it is seen in Belize and, more specifically, Indian Creek, this research seeks to highlight several key points about Maya heritage as it is generally known. Stemming from communities that occupy the land known today as Mexico and Central America, Maya heritage expands far beyond this area. The stories of immigrants who have moved away from Mexico and Central America, research and historical literature on the Maya language and culture, exhibits about the Maya in encyclopedic museums, and other similar
methods all contribute to the widespread knowledge of Maya heritage. As previously discussed, globalization has brought outside researchers into even the most rural parts of the world and has therefore forced Maya-speaking communities to find ways to represent their cultural heritage narratives if they do not want an outsider group doing it for them. Differences between Maya community members’ understanding of their heritage versus outside researchers’ narrative about Maya heritage brings into question which narrative should be used to represent Maya people on both the local and global stage. To understand these discrepancies it is critical to look at the methods in which the non-community-based narrative about Maya heritage arose and how the prioritization of the outsider narrative over the community narrative is largely due to the lack of community involvement and engagement with ongoing research projects.

*Archaeology and Oral Tradition*

Archaeological investigation is the main method in which outside researchers insert themselves into Maya-speaking communities. Researchers from academic institutions around the world travel to Mexico and Central America to excavate sites where Maya ruins or artifacts are found across the landscape. These archaeological projects often do not involve local community members beyond excavation and labor assistance. Archaeological researchers use previous literature about Maya communities in addition to the objects they recover in their excavations to create theories about Maya civilization in the past. However, Maya history, as told through contemporary Maya communities, is explained through oral narratives that have been told across generations for many years (Armstrong-Fumero and Gutierrez 2016, 405-406). The lack of communication between archaeological researchers, who are focused on the tangible remains of history, and modern Maya community members, who recount the intangible parts of their past, leads to differences in how Maya heritage is interpreted.
The importance of associated stories and emotions that are tied to place is something that cannot be overlooked when discussing Maya heritage. Oral tradition is often not favored by colonial narratives as it requires researchers to develop a relationship with members of certain communities to document the oral retelling of their history. Projects surrounding oral tradition take time and often these histories are too expansive for someone outside of the community to fully capture. Keith Basso’s (1996) “Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape” highlights the importance of oral history by documenting several Western Apache oral stories associated with places. The emotion and memory that are associated with various places on the landscape tell stories that are rich in cultural heritage and meaning for the tribe. Basso notes that the oral traditions challenged him as a researcher to capture the meaning within these stories and interpret what these oral histories revealed about Western Apache heritage (Basso 1996, 55, 57). In Maya-speaking communities that have similar oral traditions, researchers of Maya heritage should incorporate local Maya community members beyond excavation. Communicating with modern Maya people has the potential to reveal a wealth of information through oral histories that can be incorporated with archaeological evidence to formulate a better understanding of past Maya civilization.

Does Oral Tradition Have a Place in Museums?

While an argument can be made for the importance of oral tradition, there is still ongoing discussion about whether oral tradition belongs in a museum space. Museums are designed around objects and they seek to interpret past cultures through material remains. Oral tradition has no tangible component that can be displayed in a museum setting. Additionally, when oral traditions are vastly different from archaeological interpretations of past cultures, many question which account represents the historical ‘truth’.
Centering a museum exhibit around oral tradition challenges the conventional museum focus on objects. However, finding a museum that is completely based upon oral histories is rare. More commonly, oral histories are used to supplement material culture to create more complete narratives. For example, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has an exhibit within their museum dedicated to oral histories about the Holocaust as told through a series of interviews with Holocaust survivors. The exhibit consists entirely of interviews but it relies upon the other exhibits within the museum to provide context through physical objects (“Oral History — United States Holocaust Memorial Museum”, n.d.). This model, which uses a combination of objects and oral histories, has been the primary way of bringing oral tradition into museums.

An unanswered question within this discourse questions if oral tradition and material remains should be used together or kept separate when the narratives differ. Archaeological research should not be taken as the unchallenged ‘truth’ but, one could argue with the same logic that oral tradition should also not be accepted as the whole ‘truth’. There is no way of verifying either interpretation and ‘authenticity’ remains a contested term within academic discourse. However, the lack of resources dedicated to preserving and documenting oral history leaves much to be explored, especially in communities that use oral tradition as a primary form of cultural preservation. The value of oral histories in the accurate representation of indigenous identity makes them important resources during the creation of community museums.

*Maya Heritage in Community Museums*

When it comes to constructing and planning community museums in Maya communities, archaeological artifacts and oral traditions are often at the center of conversations about what materials should be used to represent Maya heritage. The long history of archaeological investigation in the region as well as the traditional understanding of museums as places that
display objects can cause community museum organizers to prefer to display objects. With the rising interest in oral history, more community museums will likely begin to challenge the conventional, object-centric museum displays in favor of exhibits that pass on oral traditions. Additionally, community museums are important in the representation of community voices. They allow Maya people to discuss their heritage in a format that they design and operate. Whether communities wish to incorporate the research of visiting scholars or wholly depend on their collective knowledge is up to the community. This gives the control of the narrative surrounding Maya heritage to Maya people, therefore pulling their interpretation of their heritage out of the periphery and putting it at the center of discourse surrounding Maya history.

**Colonialism and Maya Heritage in Belize**

Maya people and heritage are spread across Central America and Mexico, but, for the purposes of this research, a specific focus will be placed on Maya groups in Belize. The colonial history of Belize and how it has changed the Maya communities within its borders provides necessary context for the construction of the community museum in Indian Creek, Belize. The vision and plan for the Indian Creek community museum are based on the effects of colonialism both past and present. This history encompasses the early days of European colonization and includes the Maya opposition to racist hierarchies, the colonial influence in the establishment of the Belizean government, struggles with independence, as well as the modern-day fight for the creation of a Maya homeland. In Assad Shoman’s (1994) *A History of Belize in 13 Chapters*, a detailed account of Belize’s history is given through a holistic lens that highlights the struggles of minority groups under European colonial rule. As a Belizean himself, Shoman currently serves as an important intellectual figure and diplomat for Belize (Shoman and Wainwright, n.d.). Shoman’s book represents his mission to highlight the stories of people that are often left
out of colonial recounts of history and, in the case of Belize, this includes Maya communities, enslaved peoples, and women (Shoman 1994). Using Shoman’s research in conjunction with other sources on the history of Belize, this section seeks to provide a comprehensive view of Belize’s history that does not rely on colonial narratives but rather focuses on the way colonization has affected Maya and other minority communities both in the past and present.

**Early Days of Colonization in Belize**

European colonists did not stumble upon unoccupied land when they first arrived in Belize. Before the Spanish first landed in Central America in the early 16th century, Maya people were already well established in the modern-day areas of Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Belize. Maya civilization during this time consisted of many groups spread over a vast area. These groups controlled trade routes and resources across the region and their influence held strong against the introduction of colonial invaders. With a high population and stronghold in the region, Maya groups were able to create a border between themselves and Spanish colonizers. This border allowed the Maya to control an area presently recognized as southern Belize (Shoman 1994, 2-3, 5, 15). Maintaining this border demonstrates the significant Maya presence in the region during the time of European colonization.

Although Maya people inhabited and benefited from the land in modern-day Belize and other parts of Central America and Mexico, they did not view themselves as the ‘owners’ of the land. The Maya view of land as a source of life and shelter that is unable to be owned by one group of people directly clashed with the European desire to conquer and settle in Belize. Conflicts with the Maya made European colonization more complicated and the Europeans actively sought out methods of removing any opposition to their establishment in Belize. The Spanish used religion as a key part of their colonization of the region by specifically targeting the
pagan religion of the Maya. A hierarchy was created by the Spanish that favored Christianity and condemned paganism and this proved to be majorly destructive for Maya communities. Additionally, European colonizers forced Maya people into slavery, causing a dramatic decrease in Maya population size in Belize. In modern-day recounts of Belize history, the mass enslavement of Maya people has caused some scholars to argue that the land was no longer inhabited by Maya people during the time of European settlement (Shoman 1994, 9-11, 17). Such a claim feeds into colonial narratives of Belize’s history and this theory of ‘uninhabited land’ can be used to wrongly justify the colonization of Belize by European powers.

British colonization of Belize did not take full effect until the 17th and 18th centuries when the British started to raid Spanish ships along the coast of Central America. The British had an interest in the resources of Belize, specifically the logwood and mahogany which were widely available on the Belizean landscape. With an initial interest in logwood, the British did not have to travel too far inland to collect the lumber. This allowed for little interaction between Maya communities and the British during the early days of British colonization. However, once mahogany began to rise in popularity on the global market, the British pushed further inland and were met with opposition from the Maya. Maya groups in Belize at the time attacked the British as they began to exploit the mahogany resources further inland. The Maya interacted with the land through cycles of harvesting and planting and they saw the British exploitation of the land as disrespectful and unethical. As hard as they fought to ward off the British woodcutters, the Maya were eventually unsuccessful in their attempts to stop the British. British woodcutters were often scared of the resistance by the Maya and they relied heavily on the British military to continue cutting down trees and exporting mahogany (Shoman 1994, 20-21, 25). Although the
Maya may have lacked the troops and the weapons, they still put up a major fight against British exploitation of Belize’s resources.

With the increased global demand for logwood and mahogany, the British needed more labor to cut down and export the materials in Belize. This resulted in the importation of slaves to work as woodcutters. A majority of the enslaved people brought to Belize were from Africa and the Caribbean Islands and the large numbers of people needed for woodcutting meant that African-rooted culture started to grow in Belize. Emancipation laws in British colonies were often complicated as rules banning the slave trade were enacted in 1807 yet slavery was still in use well after this time. After independence, the culture and political power of Belize reflected the mass amounts of previously enslaved people that were forced to come to Belize as laborers. Therefore, in addition to cultural homogenization, slavery also caused a shift in the representation of Belize, causing indigenous people to be largely excluded from political groups and decision-making (Shoman 1994, 24, 30, 52-53). European colonists, through their need to exploit Belize’s resources, caused major changes to the cultural and political climate of Belize and, through all of this change, Maya people were forced to fight and adapt in order to survive.

*Guerra de Castas: The Continued Fight for Maya Homeland*

Another significant event in Belize’s history was the Guerra de Castas or the “Caste War” which began in 1847. The Guerra de Castas gets its name because it is said to have started over the socioeconomic hierarchies implemented by the Spanish and their successors in the Yucatán which put the Maya as the bottom “caste”. Although it is likely that this hierarchical system contributed significantly to the start of the war, the Guerra de Castas is better represented within the context of the Maya struggle against colonial powers that had been ongoing for years before the start of the war. With the violation of land boundaries and the constant disrespect of treaties
and agreements by the British and Spanish, the Maya entered into a fight for their homeland. The Maya used their military training from the Mexican fight against U.S. invasion to strengthen their ranks and prepare to fight their colonial oppressors. Belize served as a major source of weapons during the war. Varying opinions about the war by Maya people in Belize maintained the colony’s neutral standing and also allowed different Maya groups to travel into and out of the Yucatán as needed. Causing a major increase in population size in Belize, refugees escaping the war both added to the diversity of Belize and increased agricultural development in both the north and south (Shoman 1994, 60-61, 63, 68). The fighting that took place caused changes to the landscape surrounding the Yucatán while also shaping Maya identity. The Guerra de Castas was a major event in Maya and Belize history and Maya heritage today is often tied to this struggle to maintain Maya homeland.

Current Struggle for the Creation of a Maya Homeland

In the present, the fight for the creation and maintenance of a Maya homeland continues. After various violations of Maya rights by the state to use Maya land for their own benefit, two Maya communities filed for the recognition of their property rights in the Supreme Court of Belize in 2007. The court ruled that Belize should respect Maya land rights for all communities in the Toledo District of southern Belize and in 2008 the 37 remaining Maya communities in this district filed similar lawsuits. Although the Supreme Court of Belize favored the creation and protection of a Maya homeland, the Belizean government refused to acknowledge and support this decision. In 2015, Maya activists took the case to the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ), Belize’s highest appellate court, where the ruling of the Supreme Court of Belize was upheld and extended to include the need for consultation and consent for any potential interferences on Maya customary land rights (Cultural Survival 2018). Up until recently, there have been no plans
to enact the ruling for the creation of a Maya homeland. In June of 2021, the Maya people of southern Belize won a lawsuit against the government of Belize for violating their land rights without Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). The government of Belize violated the Maya land rights by expanding a road along the Southern Guatemalan border to build a border checkpoint (Cultural Survival 2021). The various court appearances, protests, and organizations by Maya communities in southern Belize show the importance of creating a Maya homeland. The continued struggle for the Maya homeland even from the days of early European colonization exemplifies the role of land, physical space, and community in the identity of the Maya people in Belize.

**Community Museum in Indian Creek, Belize**

Amidst the fight for the creation of a Maya homeland, community leaders in the Toledo District of Belize have been working with Dr. Richard Leventhal, the Penn Cultural Heritage Center, the Maya Leaders Alliance, and the Toledo Alcaldes Association to discuss the development of a community museum in Indian Creek. Due to Indian Creek’s proximity to ancient Maya sites within the Toledo District, such as Nimli Punit, the village is popular amongst tourists with 15,000-20,000 tourists passing through each year. While Indian Creek attracts many tourists, these tourists generally visit for only a few hours in the village without spending any money or engaging with the people that live there. The vision for the community museum is directed towards giving tourists a place to gather and hear more about Maya heritage. Rather than just visiting Indian Creek to look at ancient Maya sites, tourists and other visitors will have a space to learn about the Q’eqchi’ Maya people made possible through the efforts of the community (Leventhal 2020).
The content of the museum will be determined in future meetings and discussions amongst Maya activists and community members in the upcoming year. Although the project has been set back due to the COVID-19 pandemic, community leaders in Indian Creek are still determined to plan for the development of a community museum. It is the discretion of the community members to decide if they wish to include ancient Maya heritage in the community museum. Important historical events such as the Guerra de Castas and the ongoing fight for the creation of a Maya homeland are likely points of interest in terms of contemporary Maya heritage and also have the potential to be included in the museum exhibits.

It is likely that the values of the community museum will reflect the missions of recent community-generated documents such as the *Maya Atlas* (1997) and the collaborative report by the Julian Cho Society, “The Future We Dream”. The *Maya Atlas* (1997), produced through the collaboration of Maya people in Southern Belize, The Toledo Maya Cultural Council, and The Toledo Alcaldes Association, features a map of the land in Southern Belize as seen through the eyes of the Maya people who have lived there since before the time of European colonization. This project represents the ongoing fight with the Belizean government for recognition of the Maya homeland where Maya communities would be allowed to have jurisdiction over the land. Through cartography training, Maya people in Southern Belize were able to create a map of their homeland which represents the rich cultural heritage of the region alongside its geography. The *Maya Atlas* directly challenges the colonial borders that were created by Europeans to colonize the land. This project puts the power of determining which land is Maya into the hands of the Maya people who have lived in the area for centuries (Toledo Alcaldes Association, Toledo Maya Cultural Council, and The Maya People of Southern Belize 1997, 1-5, 136-145).
Moving beyond land claims, “The Future We Dream” collaborative report collected information from Maya community members pertaining to how they viewed their identity as Maya people. Within this report, the importance of agriculture, textiles, food, strong work ethic, and culture were the most commonly drawn themes by community members. It was particularly important to those that participated in the report that the narrative of Maya people as ‘poor’, ‘unproductive’, and ‘lazy’ was overturned to reveal the true, hardworking nature of Maya people. This harmful narrative perpetuates the idea that the Maya people have brought their economic troubles upon themselves when, in reality, colonial systems of oppression put Maya communities at a disadvantage in a globalized market. “The Future We Dream” is a project that amplifies the voices of Maya community members and gives people the opportunity to represent themselves and their community in a centralized manner (Julian Cho Society, Maya Leaders Alliance, and Toledo Alcaldes Association, n.d., 7-18, 31-46). The planned community museum in Indian Creek is therefore similar in its mission to the Maya Atlas and “The Future We Dream”.

Although the exact content of the museum has not yet been determined, the values expressed in these two projects will likely guide this decision-making process.

While the museum planners will want tourists to utilize the community museum space, there are also ongoing conversations about the intended audience of the museum. Tourists represent the global audience but the museum can also be used as an educational tool for local community children to learn the history of their ancestors. This vision to appeal to both audiences presents a new way of approaching the curation of exhibits in museums and more conversations about the intended audience are needed for the museum in Indian Creek. With open communication and access to resources, it is possible that the community museum will appeal to both global and local audiences. As an important place of representation of Maya
identity, this dual audience would expand the impact of the museum and give community members a large platform to discuss their history.

In the original plans for this research, I would have been able to capture the thoughts and opinions of community members surrounding the museum in Indian Creek. Had I been able to conduct this field research, I would have used observation as well as interviews to document how the community museum was being used to address community needs. Listening to the different types of meetings, those with the museum organizers and those with the general community, I planned to compare and contrast the ideas between the two groups. Additionally, I wanted to interview and observe Maya activists who are not from Indian Creek to see what role they played in the museum planning. The research conducted here provides the necessary background and context for the construction of the museum in Indian Creek and serves as an investigation into how community museums can change decolonization in encyclopedic museums. If the original plans for this research were to be carried out then a more personal and ethnographic view of the significance of community museums would be provided. Speaking with community members and allowing them to contribute to this research is crucial in understanding the true impact of community museums. It is their voices and experiences that provide the most insight into the realities of community-driven museums.

Plans to visit Indian Creek and reestablish a timeline for the planning and construction of the museum are set to occur in 2022. With the ongoing fight for the Maya homeland as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, timelines for the creation of the museum are subject to change. However, the vision for the museum remains. Indian Creek villagers as well as local Maya activists are the driving force behind this project and their dedication will ultimately make the vision for the community museum a reality.
Discussion and Conclusion

The magnitude of colonization should not be lost in decolonial discourse. Although the terms ‘colonization’ and ‘decolonization’ are growing in popularity in the media and university curricula, it is critical that the effects on indigenous and descendant communities are not normalized along with the terms. Museums around the world should feel the weight of colonization on their institutions and their focus should be placed on working towards decoloniality.

As discussed, there are various decolonial practices occurring today in museum spaces. Although these efforts may stem from moral obligation or genuine interest in supporting affected indigenous or descendant communities, they ultimately represent a response to public discontent with museums. Decolonization requires an upheaval of traditional museum practice and this is a change that may feel uncomfortable and scary for well-established encyclopedic museums. Many of these museums have been around for a long time and they take pride in being ‘stewards of culture’. It is difficult for current museum personnel to hear that their position in a museum contributes to the coloniality of the museum. However, decolonization is intended to be uncomfortable for institutions like encyclopedic museums but not meant to discourage people within museums that wish to enact this change.

A question that I have been asked multiple times throughout this research has prompted my opinion on what role museums play in decolonization and if they will be deemed obsolete by decolonial discourse. This concern for the potential eradication of museums, in my opinion, is largely unfounded. While I understand the concern that people have for the potential loss of museums, it is unlikely that these institutions will be completely rejected due to their coloniality when they operate within colonial societies. As previously mentioned, I have chosen to take a
focus on colonization within museums because they are teaching institutions that directly address representation and identity. This does not mean that museums are the only places where colonization is present. All modern-day systems of government, economics, healthcare, military, and beyond reflect the effects of colonization and therefore museums are one puzzle piece among many that make up the concept as a whole.

Additionally, I hope this concern for the loss of museums to decoloniality has been alleviated by my discussion of community museums. These community-run institutions are examples of the potential of museum space and how it can be utilized to benefit communities marginalized by colonization. The power dynamics implemented by colonization shift as communities take control of their cultural narratives and represent their shared identities according to their own will. As places of representation on the global stage as well as education for local community members, community museums utilize the museum structure to bring important histories of culture and heritage out of the periphery into the center of the conversation.

The plans for the construction of a community museum in Indian Creek are ongoing and amongst the community discussions and planning for the museum lies valuable insight into the community museum process. Planning for the intended audience and how the exhibits will reflect this audience will occur soon as the project continues to unfold. Ethnographic research that follows this process and documents all the decisions that are made along with their motivations would provide important contributions to supplement the argument discussed here. Future research into this process, with consent from the villagers in Indian Creek, would evaluate the role of all the organizers contributing to the project including the community members, Maya activists, and representatives from the Penn Cultural Heritage Center.
Highlighting the importance of community museums in museum decolonization discourse is critical when seeking to take a community-centered approach to decolonization in encyclopedic museums. Big changes for museums are on the horizon and it is time for museums to cultivate their full potential by embracing change and supporting the communities they display.
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