

RESILIENCE, RESISTANCE, AND REDEMPTION:  
OPENING ETHICAL MUSEUM SPACE FOR DISPLACED  
VOICES IN OUR MODERN ERA

by

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## ABSTRACT

Museums traditionally silenced marginalized voices through their western colonial authority. Because of the passive nature of museum spaces, minority voices, especially the voices of displaced persons or refugees, are actively oppressed and marginalized. *Resilience, Resistance, and Redemption* uses case studies from the United States and Europe in order to analyze how museums throughout the western world have or have not engaged with displaced voices and their stories. Using theoretical and practical public historical practices this thesis seeks to give the reader insight into how decolonization practices have been and should be implemented in museum spaces. This thesis focuses on ethical and empathetic use of activism and solidarity by museum workers and more specifically curators to decolonize museum spaces and incorporate a more diverse range of voices into these spaces.

## Glossary of Terms

Colonization

Colonization, for the purpose of this thesis, includes the physical action or process of settling a land and the controlling of said land and its use, memory, and the stories that are remembered. Colonization includes the debate over contested spaces and memory. It also includes the inequitable distribution of power over narratives, memories, and authority within museum spaces.

Colonial Systems in Museum Spaces

Western colonialism has long driven the writing and shaping of history and, by extension, has shaped our museum spaces. Traditional museum building has followed the same path as traditional historiography. It has placed western cultures and people at the forefront of history and “...celebrated Western humankind’s place in nature.”<sup>1</sup> Whether it be cultural artifacts taken wrongfully from global societies or the exploitative relationships between marginalized communities and the museum world, museums are riddled with colonial relationships and inequitable power relationships. These relationships did not disappear following shifts in the museum field during the 1990s which sought to create more equitable spaces.<sup>2</sup> Rather, they permeate and persist like a cancer which is hard to see without a microscope.

Refugee/Displaced Persons

The western nature of the term refugee, the colonial power structures which define refugee, and its exclusivity make the term flawed and unfit for many museum spaces. Scholars criticize the word refugee as too narrow and is not inclusive. Micah Rankin states that the definition of refugee is “...motivated by pro-Western political values’ in such a way that it does not seek to reinforce

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 199.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 68.

the idea of, ‘the right to a safe and stable community; [rather] it seeks to ensure that an individual will be free from discrimination within a given community’.<sup>3</sup> Jones expands pointing out that the post-Westphalia state system imposed on many countries by Europeans, created a system in which local leaders of world regions were removed and created political systems which mirrored those in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Creation of colonial states in new territories relied on “...the underlying logics of racism, nationalism, and groupism [to] create conditions in which it is acceptable to treat other human beings in a dehumanizing and violent manner.”<sup>5</sup> It gave predominantly Western countries the control over territories throughout the world to extract whatever they needed from the land. More importantly, it gave Europeans the right to determine the status of people and whether they should be allowed to move throughout the world. Europeans created the notion that people could be categorized and tied to an artificial region and homeland. According to Jones, “...these homelands unambiguously should determine each individual’s fate on the earth.”<sup>6</sup> Because the definition of refugees is bound to western colonialism, I will be adopting a broader definition. I will use the umbrella terms “displaced person”, “refugee”, and “disadvantaged persons” interchangeably each term including any persons moves due to economic pressure, political pressure, physical violence, climate change, etc. This includes any persons that is externally or internally displaced.

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<sup>3</sup> Micah Rankin, “New Issues in Refugee Research,” UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, April 2005, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/research/working/425f71a42/extending-limits-narrowing-scope-deconstructing-oau-refugee-definition.html?query=refugee%20definition>.

<sup>4</sup> Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (New York, NY: Verso, 2017), 108.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

### Decolonization

This is the process in which colonial power, institutional authority, and legal control is transferred from an imperial power to formerly colonized and marginalized groups. Practically this can take many different shapes in museums. A few of the most commonly seen include sharing authority with marginalized communities, creating exhibits driven by the narratives of marginalized communities, repatriating stolen or wrongfully acquired artifacts, and the hiring of marginalized community members. While these are some of the most commonly employed solutions to ridding museums of colonial ties, they are in no way the only solutions. Decolonization of museum spaces is only limited to the imagination of museum staff members. This being the case, decolonization is the process of museums and their staff members amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and giving power back to these groups.

### Shared Authority

Shared Authority is the action of co-creating history with community partners. Shared Authority relies on allowing community partners and collaborators to speak on their own behalf and to contribute to the production of history and knowledge. This is also commonly referred to as co-authorship. It also relies heavily on collecting the histories of common people and their stories.

The tenants of expanded shared authority requires the navigation of power dynamics, “long-haul” work, expanded exploration of memory, and increased interdisciplinary training.

It extols the new ideas on time, resources, power, memory, and interdisciplinary work which come together thus establishing more ethical forms of knowledge production.

## INTRODUCTION

## ACTIVISIM IN MUSEUM SPACES

Tracing the halls of the Icelandic national museum, I encountered the traditional exhibits one would expect of a museum of this sort. There were glistening jewels from bygone eras, exhibits showing old ways of life of Icelanders, and exhibits discussing the importance of Vikings and Christianity in Iceland. They were exhibits that I expected and was delighted to view and learn about. As I kept walking along the hallways, I eventually came to the entrance of a circular room. There was an open layout divided by only a singular wall in the center, which did not stretch from wall to wall. I was immediately struck by how out of place this room felt. It piqued my curiosity, and as a 20-year-old on my first solo trip abroad and newly enthused with the museum's energy, I quickly checked it out. Little did I know that this singular room would come to change my life and the pathway of my academic career.

I walked into the room expecting more images of Vikings or famous Icelanders to greet my eye, but that could not have been further from the reality of this exhibit. Instead, my gaze was met by people from all different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. My immediate reaction to this was: These are not Icelanders. I was a bit confused and taken aback. Upon the walls were carefully hung images and stories of displaced persons from a number of countries who had fled to Iceland seeking asylum. Contained in each story was the image of the displaced person, thereby humanizing and immediately connecting me to them. Next to the image was the person's story written in their own hand instead of a plaque written by some far off curator. It was their story according to them and no one else. It told of how they came to Iceland, why they moved, and how they were adjusting to Icelandic life. It described their struggles, hardships, and joys.

One story was of woman had fled from Iran to Iceland. In her personal writing, she stated that she originally came to Iceland seeking political safety and a better life. However, what developed for her was so much more than she had hoped. She created a home where she was free to participate in politics, a place where she felt safe, and most importantly a space where she could have a voice. This is not to say that her story was devoid of hardship. Quite the opposite, she spoke of the hardships of integrating and acclimating to a new culture and environment. Her narrative, and many others, explored the complexities of being a refugee. Each story was unique and individualized and provided the museum goer an insight into a displaced person's life. After leaving the museum, I asked myself why this museum exhibit surprised me so much? Why did I react the way I did, and what did that say about my museum learning and experiences?

I was struck by just how uncommon this was for an exhibit. It gave the visitor a view of refugee life without tokenizing one group or person. The exhibit spoke not only of these individuals, but also the plight of other displaced persons in this world. It gave an overview of Iceland and its interactions with displaced persons and how this history had developed. Often western museums trend away from exhibits such as the one found in Iceland. They deal broadly with past events, peoples, and places. Rarely do they venture into the present. In a statement by Richard Sandell and Robert Janes, two scholars of public history and activism, "The global museum community, a sleeping giant if ever there was one, is stirring from its slumber."<sup>7</sup> The ghosts and sleeping giants of the past linger, begging to be seen, to be heard. George Goode, one of the earliest assistant secretaries of the Smithsonian, stated that museums that get stuck in the past must be "...reconstructed, transformed from a cemetery of bric-a-brac into a nursery of

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, "Posterity Has Arrived." ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 1.

living thought.”<sup>8</sup> Goode’s lesson written in 1889, still holds true to this day. With patience and learning museums, like so many other “dead” institutions and entities, can become lively, engaging, and enthralling spaces once again. The museum is an avenue of learning for diverse audiences. Museums are unique spaces which must pursue a more active and ethical role in presenting controversial topics to the public. The refugee crisis of our modern era is an example of a controversial topic that museums generally ignore. The intent of this thesis is to explore ethical, empathetic, activist, and deconstructionist museum building, which is centered on solidarity with displaced persons’ and their voices.

The same year that I visited the Icelandic National Museum and experienced an ethical depiction of displaced persons’ history, was also the year that my extended family, the Moussallis, fled Syria just outside of Damascus in order to escape the Syrian civil war and its violence. They sought asylum and protection in the United States, living with my uncle who had become an American citizen years prior to this event. He, like so many others in history, came to the United States to seek a better life. Years later his family would follow, not because they had a choice, but out of necessity. Theirs was a long road filled with legal obstacles and hardship which, in the end, resulted in them making it safely to the United States. Liisa Malkki, an anthropologist studying refugees and the field of refugee studies, voices many of the obstacles faced by families like mine:

Nationalism and racism, xenophobia and immigration policies, state practices of violence and war, censorship and silencing, human rights and challenges to state sovereignty, ‘development’ discourse and humanitarian interventions, citizenship and cultural or religious identities, travel and diaspora, and memory and historicity

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 87.

are just some of the issues and practices that generate the inescapably relevant context of human displacement today.<sup>9</sup>

My family's experience is atypical because they were lucky to make it safely to their chosen asylum country. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) "1 in every 108 people globally is either an asylum-seeker, internally displaced or a refugee."<sup>10</sup> UNHCR also estimates that "1 person is forcibly displaced roughly every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution."<sup>11</sup> Many of these individuals never reach their chosen asylum country. This event combined with my experience in Iceland fueled me to pursue a thesis in activism within museums.

Society often becomes aware of refugee plight once refugees have made self-sacrifice or a situation has become desperate. Viet Than Nguyen, a prominent writer and refugee himself, discusses this idea in his text *Nothing Ever Dies*. Nguyen discusses how the stories of those affected by war, who are consequently displaced, are not shown until an act of self-sacrifice or evil has been done by or done to a refugee. In his text, he uses the example of a monk burning himself during the Vietnam War. Reiterating this story, Nguyen states "Sacrificing one's self in order to be heard is not enough."<sup>12</sup> Rather, museums must take an active and proactive role in engaging with the stories of Nguyen, Moussallis, and other displaced persons. In doing so, stories from families which are not as fortunate as my own will have their voices amplified amidst the tides of violence which dominate our world borders.

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<sup>9</sup> Liisa Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 495-523, Accessed March 22, 2020, [www.jstor.org/stable/2155947](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155947).

<sup>10</sup> "Refugee Statistics", *UNHCR USA* online, accessed on April 20, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Figures at a Glance", *UNHCR USA* online, accessed on April 20, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen *Nothing Ever Dies* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 108.

Movement and inequitable power dynamics are two norms which now dominate our world. It is up to institutions like museums to speak of the realities which permeate our society that are often glossed over because they run counter to the identity that western countries have built for themselves. These are the “hard truths” that come along with movement and colonization. Displacement is not an issue that will disappear. Museums must actively engage with the refugee voices while simultaneously opening ethical space for these voices to be presented.

Western societies see refugees and their history as a series of temporary events. According to Barry Stein, “Refugee problems are viewed as temporary and unique events. This inaccurate perspective is the most corrosive and damaging element that all refugee programs must confront.”<sup>13</sup> Westerners who view refugee crises as temporary phenomena lead to loss of funding for museum exhibits about refugees. In turn this can lead to a loss of donations and funding for the UNHCR and refugee populations. It also leads to a loss of any recognition outside of this temporary status for displaced persons. This creates a host of issues for museum work. Once funding for aid is cut or becomes scarce, the educational programs on which museums rely suffer. When the public views an event such as a refugee crisis as just another small blip in the overall historical narrative, it is ignored by most museums. This comes with some exceptions of specialty museums whose directive or mission statement is to focus on refugees.

Ignoring refugee history is not the solution. Most museums have a broad enough mission statement to encompass displaced voices in their institution. The Museum of the Rockies in

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<sup>13</sup> Barry Stein, "The Refugee Experience: Defining the Parameters of a Field of Study," *The International Migration Review* 15, no. 1/2 (1981): 320, Accessed September 15, 2019. doi:10.2307/2545346.

Bozeman, Montana is one example. The mission statement of this museum states, “Museum of the Rockies inspires life-long learning in science, history, culture, and art; advances knowledge through collections, research and discovery; and presents engaging, vibrant exhibits and educational opportunities. Museum of the Rockies brings the world to Montana and shares Montana with the world.”<sup>14</sup> Bringing Montana to the world and the world to Montana allows for shows of all types including those focused on refugees. A broader example comes from the Smithsonian and the National Museum of American History. The latter states, “Our collections, exhibitions, research, publications, and educational programs all support the museum’s basic mission—to use the infinite richness of American history to help people make sense of the present and shape a more humane future—and to make our exhibitions and programs as accessible as possible and engaging to all visitors.”<sup>15</sup> The Smithsonian has a similarly broad mission statement which reads that the intent of this institution is to “...build on its unique strengths to engage and to inspire more people, where they are, with greater impact, while catalyzing critical conversation on issues affecting our nation and the world.”<sup>16</sup> These two examples show that museums throughout the United States, whether large or small, have broad enough mission statements to include refugee voices and stories. Displacement is an issue that is not leaving our world and will continue to increase in the years to come. Indeed, activists in the museum field assert that in conjunction with mission statements, museums need “An advocacy policy in each museum [that] would help to nurture and strengthen this broader vision, by

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<sup>14</sup> Museum of the Rockies, “Museum Mission”, <https://www.museumoftherockies.org/about-mor/mission-vision/#:~:text=MISSION,vibrant%20exhibits%20and%20educational%20opportunities>. Accessed on May 14, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> National Museum of American History, “Mission & History”, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/museum/mission-history/#:~:text=Our%20collections%2C%20exhibitions%2C%20research%2C,accessible%20as%20possible%20and%20engaging>, Accessed on March 15, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Smithsonian, “Purpose and Vision”, <https://www.si.edu/about/mission>, Accessed on March 15, 2020.

delineating what issues are important and how the museum will respond when confronted with moral and civic challenges.”<sup>17</sup> Because of the broad nature of many museum mission statements, museums have a moral obligation to be on the forefront of action during these crises.

While many institutions have broad mission statements, they often fail to include disadvantaged voices as the focal point of exhibit spaces. Scholar Bryony Onciul, a public historian focused on community engagement, indigenizing and decolonizing museology, avows that “The hegemony of Western museology and approaches to heritage preservation has contributed to two phenomena that pose a threat to indigenous [disadvantaged] curation 1.) the global spread and reproduction of Western-oriented models, and 2.) the reliance on expert-driven, top-down, professionalized/standardized museum training and development.”<sup>18</sup> These forces undermine refugee history and “...paradoxically the preservation of people’s cultural heritage.”<sup>19</sup> What this hegemony creates is a norm in which disadvantaged voices like those of refugees are marginalized in museums. Their stories are either excluded or misrepresented with western epistemologies imposed on refugee histories. In turn, these create ethically unsound museum exhibits. Such exhibits are ones which are not “Living in truth about the world’s issues and the museum’s role is also a means of resisting manipulation by governments and corporatists invested in the status quo.”<sup>20</sup> The idea of resisting the hegemony and actively working to create museum exhibits that do not marginalize disadvantaged voices are some of the core ideals of ethical museum construction.

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived.” ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 14.

<sup>18</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 119.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived.” ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 14.

Issues of ethical presentation have not gone away within museum spaces. In fall 2019 in Bozeman, Montana an advisor of mine had an encounter firsthand with an issue of ethical presentation. At a recent acquisitions meeting at this institution there was opportunity to purchase a Plains Buffalo Hide Robe. The robe came from one of the last battles between United States forces Cheyenne during the Indian wars. One expert who viewed the robe stated "...the battle was one of the largest in the war and effectively ended the Northern Cheyenne participation in the Indian wars."<sup>21</sup> They continued, "One could hypothesize that this robe was booty from this campaign."<sup>22</sup> The curator presented this Native American robe of questionable provenance. The robe had been passed around wealthy westerns who had treated it as an exotic commodity to be collected instead of a cultural artifact deserving of respect. When presenting this robe, the curator did not consider the implications of acquiring a robe which had been stolen from a battlefield by a soldier following the massacre of a Cheyenne tribe. Upon his return to east coast the soldier had sold the robe as an exotic collector's item. After a bit of discussion, the curator concluded that it was ethical to present this piece and saw no issue with its acquisition. In the end what made him change his mind on the acquisition was a question posed by my advisor: How would he (the curator) feel if someone else perverted his family's story? This question brought up further lines of thinking which included: Who is included? Who is marginalized? What power dynamics come into play when determining these designations? What should museums consider important when moving forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This example placed the story of the soldier and the wealthy collectors at the center of the narrative and relegated the Cheyenne to the margin. It continued the trend of placing "...Western Caucasians at the pinnacle

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<sup>21</sup> Lisa Verwys, email to the author, March 11, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

of creation.”<sup>23</sup> This anecdote exemplifies the idea that people outside of western Caucasians do not have, nor should they have, a voice within western institutions. This sets up an inequitable power dynamic between the predominantly western male staff of museums and the voices of those on the margin. While museums have changed dramatically in the past fifty years, stories such as these are not outside the norm and happen every day in museums throughout the western world.

There is a need for museological change. Museums have begun to evolve; but this change is slow, disjointed, and often excludes many disadvantaged groups. According to Stephen Weil, a legal expert in the arts and a museum administrator long associated with the Smithsonian Institute, museums are intrinsically linked to the “...wealth, power, knowledge and taste shaped by the larger social order.”<sup>24</sup> When that power lies with western hegemonic authorities, it leaves little room for others. Bryony Onciul points out that many oppressed populations must conform to current Western museological standards to gain recognition and participation. This is a form of assimilation and silencing which is equally as dangerous as past practices of exclusion.<sup>25</sup>

Assimilation has created inequitable power dynamics between museum staff and representatives of disadvantaged populations, which negatively influences the accuracy of the museum’s collections and exhibits. This has led to disadvantaged populations having little influence on the collections and exhibits which are supposed to accurately represent those peoples stories. An example of this comes from Bryony Onciul. She points out that some early museums in America exploited Native peoples that were desperate for food or supplies. They

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 204.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>25</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 243.

were encouraged to trade away objects of cultural significance in order to obtain much needed supplies and food. Museums leveraged their position with desperate Native peoples and exploited them in order to gain objects for their collections. In turn, this has led to disadvantaged populations having a superficial role in museology. These power dynamics are the lynch pin of unethical museum exhibits that fall in line with past ideas of museology.

Ethical museum exhibits which hinge on activism are necessary to creating a more equitable society. Yet museums are having a hard time meeting the challenges of today because of a lack of professional staff. In the United States, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics or Department of Labor, there are 34,000 curator jobs available in our country at any given time.<sup>26</sup> According to the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), roughly 850 million people visit museums each year; this number is more than all sports events in the U.S. combined.<sup>27</sup> Because of the multitude of people visiting museums there is a need for more curators as well as better trained curatorial staffs. This is vital because, according to Weil, museums are "...the cornerstone of which the whole enterprise rests: [is] to make a positive difference in the quality of people's lives."<sup>28</sup> With over 800 million people visiting museums annually, museums have a duty to facilitate holistic learning for their visitors. Solutions to remedy past injustices must be implemented immediately.

It is the job of the museum professional to help facilitate learning about our world and to engage and inspire visitors. Museums annually expect roughly 55 million school children to visit

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<sup>26</sup> "Archivists, Curators, and Museum Workers," *U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/curators-museum-technicians-and-conservators.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> "Museum Facts & Data," *AAM Online*, accessed December 28, 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-museums/museum-facts-data/>.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 74.

their institutions as a part of their education.<sup>29</sup> The lessons that are imparted on these children will likely be the ones that they carry for the rest of their lives. Most will remember their first trip to a museum space and the lessons they learned on this trip. It's not a tangible or quantifiable experience, but it is important, nonetheless. Museums have a duty to be better if for no other reason than to influence a better future. One school child walking through a museum, could be the next great climate activist like Greta Thunberg and might start a movement that could change the world. Because of its position as institution of learning for all ages it is vital that museums present forward thinking holistic histories.

I have been a museum professional during much of my adult life and have tried to implement each of these goals in my everyday work. I approach the writing of this text as a white male who has never been displaced. I have never been through the trauma of displacement nor have I suffered from the western colonial power structures which permeate society. I have explored these ideas and I take many of my findings and thoughts directly from displaced persons. I am also influenced by professionals who have made it their life's work to dismantle the inequitable power structures which dominate our world. I do not consider myself an expert on displaced persons, but I do consider myself knowledgeable on ethical, deconstructionist, and empathetic museum building.

Because of my background my role in this story is that of a megaphone. I am here to amplify voices which already exist and must be heard. I am not a savior, nor do I view myself as doing a great justice. I am merely using my position as a privileged white male to help amplify

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<sup>29</sup> "Museum Facts & Data," *AAM Online*, accessed December 28, 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-museums/museum-facts-data/>.

disadvantaged voices. No one is completely subjective; we all have our lived experiences which influence our academia. Both Amy Lonetree and Katarina Jagodinsky, two prevalent scholars of Native American history in the United States, discuss the importance of incorporating themselves into the history of their pieces. They know that by involving themselves in the writing of the history, they become part of it. And the power structures which affect their writings are therefore evident to the reader. Because of this, I do the same and I approach the writing of this thesis with the knowledge that I myself benefited from the western colonial power structures that suppress many voices. Change must occur because the continuation of this colonial structure in museum spaces hurts the whole of our society.

The people and stories discussed in this thesis have been displaced either externally or internally and have been moved for any number of reasons. This work is meant to show how museums engage with current controversies and how they elicit and encourage public debate, with refugees and displaced persons as the focal point. The chapters of this thesis will describe what an ethical museum exhibit looks like and will present case studies that demonstrate varying levels of engagement with displaced populations and their stories.

The first chapter provides a brief insight into the history of museums, the development of ethical museum exhibits, and how museums become activist while standing in solidarity with refugees and marginalized groups in general. Drawing from examples throughout the museum world, the chapter first addresses the history of museum spaces and how they evolved over time. Although museum work as a legitimized profession has only been around for close to a century, it has been a period of rapid change and development. Museums large and small have adapted and found niches to create unique learning spaces. Unfortunately, numerous museums have

restricted voices and stories, and many have remained passive in order to maintain funding and visitation. This has become an outdated practice and museums are in jeopardy of being left behind if they do not take a more active role. The second portion of the first chapter will focus on why it is important to develop ethical and empathetic museum exhibits which help to deconstruct colonial authority. Finally, the chapter will explore Steve Striffler's assertion that "The massive global inequalities produced by colonialism, slavery, and the industrial revolution generated ideas and movements about human equality and justice, about the place of collective action in transforming society."<sup>30</sup> It will argue that decolonization, solidarity and activism are hallmarks of exhibits on the history of oppressed populations such as Native Americans and African Americans. However, refugee populations have been pushed to the side and there is a need for expansion of these people to be included in decolonization. The overarching goal is to divorce the colonial authority and state power from the museum as an institution and lay that power in the hands of those whose stories are being presented.

Chapter two turns attention to our first case study, the "Many Voices, One Nation" exhibit. It will explore the relationship of borders, violence, and voices at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. The exhibit explores the merits and shortcomings of the exhibit and draws together some of the key lessons from the previous chapter. The "Many Voices, One Nation" exhibit is a good beginning to decolonization. Its incorporation of a plurality of voices and its innovative use of technology, signal that the Smithsonian has a good base of decolonization to work upon. However, in order to become empathetic allies in solidarity, striving towards change, the exhibit must be driven by refugees and tell the hard truths

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<sup>30</sup> Steve Striffler, "US Empire, Anti-Imperialism, and Revolution," In *Solidarity: Latin America and the US Left in the Era of Human Rights*, 23. London: Pluto Press, 2019. Accessed June 12, 2020. doi:10.2307/j.ctv9zckcf.5.

of colonization. The idea of this chapter is to highlight the fact that decolonization in regard to refugee population has begun. However, “Many Voices, One Nation” is a far cry from an activist exhibit and does not stand in solidarity with refugee populations.

Chapter three focuses on the gallery and exhibit “Who Is A Refugee?”. This exhibit was housed in a small space at Montana State University. “Who Is A Refugee?” gives visitors an example of what a museum exhibit which centers on solidarity, activism, and community driven narratives should look like; a massive building or ample funding is not necessary to accomplish these goals. Additionally, it shows how small institutions can have a big impact on historic healing through empathetic museum construction. However, because of the lack of training of student curators, a lack of time to plan and implement, and a lack of exploration of the hard truths of this conflict it failed to fully live up to its potential. The overarching theme of chapter three is that activist and ethical museum building does not require vast funding. With innovation and creativity museums can stand in solidarity with refugees.

Chapter four shifts focus from the United States to Germany with the exhibit “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” (Migration Moves the City). This strong example of ethical museum construction and activism shows an exhibit which integrates traditional history with refugee history. The chapter emphasizes the importance of activism and solidarity in museums. It also highlights voices and stories of refugees. “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” also employs innovative technology to connect visitors to these populations and their goals, struggles, and futures in Germany. Despite best intentions, “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” separates traditional and migrant history. This further reinforces traditional power dynamics and narratives of separation.

Even though the exhibit is flawed, it is an early example of ethically building a decolonized exhibit, which heals past historic traumas, that should be followed by museums globally.

Each case study is unique and provides a different lesson. The overarching goal of each chapter and case study is to show different levels of engagement with refugee populations. It is to show how museums throughout the world are grappling with one of the world's most pressing issues. Because, as many public historians such as Richard Sandell attests, museums do not currently "...qualify as revolutionary organizations."<sup>31</sup> Indeed he further asserts that "As crises mount, museums are alarmingly invisible – reluctant to disturb or assert."<sup>32</sup> Moving forward these three case studies have many lessons to teach about activism, solidarity, empathy and ethical museum construction. As Weil suggests, museums must "...seek not just to do things right, but also to do the right things."<sup>33</sup>

The concluding chapter turns attention to what I will be calling "activist museology". Building on arguments made by scholars such as Bryony Onciul and Amy Lonetree, I argue that museums still have a long way to go in order to be fully decolonized. I also argue that time is of the essence. Museums must change. It is on us, as museum professionals, to facilitate this change alongside those voices which we are helping to amplify. With enough museum professionals, museums can become places of fast-acting change that is driven by activism and solidarity as its core principals. When activism is rooted in ethical presentation and practices, museums become unique spaces of healing, learning, and civic engagement for all.

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, "Posterity Has Arrived." ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 16.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, "Posterity Has Arrived." ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 18.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 80.

## CHAPTER ONE

## THE ETHICAL MUSEUM SPACE

My nephew, Tristan, walks enthusiastically by my side. About eleven years old, he is excited that I am finally giving him a tour of the museum where I have worked for the past few years. He stops at nearly every display, asking questions about content and points to the parts he finds most interesting. This is not his first time through the museum. And not his first time visiting the Native American hall of this museum which has been recently updated. As make our way out of the dinosaur exhibits and into the Native American hall, he immediately notices that the mannequins which had stood vigil at the start of the Native American hall for decades are missing. In their place stands a general history of Yellowstone. He turns to me and asks where the mannequins have gone. I realize that this is a teaching moment. So, I explain to him that it was not good museum practice to have them there because it suggested that Native peoples had lived along with dinosaurs. He looks back at the hall, shrugs and says “yeah, that makes sense”. I was struck by how easily a young person could understand the reasoning behind changing a museum exhibit. His response made me realize that this lesson could be applied to anyone. If it is this easy to teach my nephew about museum ethics, maybe it could be as simple to teach others about displaced persons or other controversial topics. When we create new ethical and empathetic museum exhibits, we create fuller and richer sites of learning which benefit everyone.

A Brief History of Museology

Human collections and exhibitions have existed for as long as societies have existed. According to John Simmons “By the third millennium BCE, the Sumerian archives in Ebla (in

modern-day Syria, about fifty kilometers south of Aleppo) held extensive collections of clay tablets that were used to teach writing to student scribes.”<sup>34</sup> Much of early human collection was in the form of grave goods and was exclusively for those of the upper class.<sup>35</sup> Many early conceptions of the western museum and exhibiting can be traced back to early civilizations in Egypt and Rome. Many museologists point to the Temple of Muses in Alexandria, Egypt as one of the first examples of a pseudo-museum institution where learning and historic objects were combined.<sup>36</sup> Romans were one of the first massive western collectors and “Roman collections were usually exhibited in their owner’s homes.”<sup>37</sup> While the Romans and Egyptians were some of the first collectors and set the course for early museology, no direct links can be made from these institutions to modern museums, but they are evidence of a continuous, worldwide culture of collecting and exhibiting objects.”<sup>38</sup>

While the Romans and Egyptians set the course of early western collecting, it was religious institutions that set the stage for what would lead to the establishment of modern museums. Simmons states “Before the establishment of universities in Europe, the church was the center of intellectual life, the custodian of education and knowledge, and as a result, collecting was largely confined to religious institutions.”<sup>39</sup> The pre-history of museums was the establishment of institutions where learning and objects came together. The church as an institution of gathering and learning solidified the idea of creating areas for gathering historical objects and bettering oneself through analysis and knowledge.

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<sup>34</sup> John Simmons, *Museums: A History*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 23.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

It was during the Renaissance and “The Age of the Marvelous” that collection became a social activity. These collections came to be called museums. It was during the Renaissance that merchants, lawyers, apothecaries, and royalty began collecting in earnest.<sup>40</sup> These collections were focused on rare, “exotic”, unusual, or extraordinary objects. It was deemed “The Age of the Marvelous” because of the “...intense fascination with the marvelous, with those things or events that were unusual, unexpected, exotic, extraordinary, or rare.”<sup>41</sup> This period was pivotal to museum history because it set a precedent of exploitive collecting and the silencing of disadvantaged people that were under the colonial rule of European powers. This exploitive collecting had two major effects. First, these collections set the stage for Europe’s obsession with collecting. Secondly, it established the idea of extracting artifacts, stories, and voices of disadvantaged populations

The Renaissance and “The Age of the Marvelous” laid the foundation for what is known as “cabinets of curiosities” by wealthy collectors. These collectors would go on to create many of the earliest conceptions of museums. According to Simmons “Exhibiting a cabinet of curiosities in one’s home soon became an important means of expressing (or sometimes increasing) prestige and social standing throughout Europe.”<sup>42</sup> While they were often disorganized and held little educational purpose, “cabinets of curiosities” were the first conceptualization of western museum exhibits. Additionally, this was the period of European and western history in which wealthy collectors spent vast amounts of money in order to collect rare or “exotic” items. Often, towards the end of their lives, they would try to find places to house these objects. The pattern

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<sup>40</sup> John Simmons, *Museums: A History*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 68.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

that emerged was one of wealthy individuals using their personal collections to create public museums.<sup>43</sup> “The first public museum in England was the result of the near-obsessive collecting activities of John Tradescant the Elder.”<sup>44</sup> However, though benefactors such as Tradescant helped to create many early museums “...many early modern museums were open only to a narrow sectors of the populace until well into the nineteenth century.”<sup>45</sup> Wealthy individuals and cabinets of curiosity were key to the establishment of early modern museums.

### The Museum as We Know it Today

It is in the late nineteenth century that we see the first modern museums. It was during this time that we see the emergence of national museums such as the Smithsonian.<sup>46</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, museums underwent a process of professionalization and specialization. More importantly it is also during this period that debates around the definition of a museum emerged. It from this point that museologists can trace the idea of the museum as a space of cultural power. Tony Bennett, a prominent museologist, asserts “It is, then, the view of high culture as a resource that might be used to regulate the field of social behavior in endowing individuals with new capacities for self-monitoring and self-regulation that the field of culture.”<sup>47</sup> Put more simply, early modern museums, much like today's establishments, were places that could regulate culture and improve society. It is an idea which persists to today. James Cuno, president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust based his definition of museums loosely on these ideas. He states that museums are “...a repository of objects, dedicated to the

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<sup>43</sup> John Simmons, *Museums: A History*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 150.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>47</sup> Tony Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 20.

promotion of tolerance and inquiry and the dissipation of ignorance, where the artifacts of one culture and one time are preserved and displayed next to those of other cultures and times without prejudice.”<sup>48</sup> However, this definition is too narrow for a complex space such as a museum. Cuno further elaborates on his point stating that museums are a “collection to encourage people to rethink conventional hierarchies of power and importance and to challenge people to consider the historical and current realities of the world’s diverse, complicated, and interrelated cultures.”<sup>49</sup> Early museology effects current museology in many ways. The early ideas of a museum’s purpose and role its in society have not altered much over time.

Extraction and dehumanization were the hallmarks of early museums. Simmons states that “The increased exploration brought to Europe undreamed-of riches, unfamiliar objects made by new arts and crafts, and unknown species of plants and animals were eagerly purchased by the growing class of private collectors for their cabinets of curiosities.”<sup>50</sup> However, these objects were often either stolen or bought in an exploitive manner. While some objects were “legally” acquired, it was typically at the expense of the disadvantaged populations. Simmons continues by stating “Throughout the nineteenth century, collections continued to flow into European museums from the exploration, exploitation, and colonization of other continents and islands.”<sup>51</sup> What followed this period was the establishment and the professionalization of the museum field.

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<sup>48</sup> James Cuno, *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> John Simmons, *Museums: A History*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 91.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

Along with the museum field becoming more established and professional, a disturbing power dynamic pattern emerged. This power dynamic can be described as being similar to the power dynamic of the aristocracy of medieval Europe. As Weil states, “The majestic and deeply founded museum whose legitimacy was unquestionable, whose entitlement to ongoing public support was simply taken as a matter of course, whose authority was absolute, and whose inner workings were of no proper concern to anybody beyond its walls.”<sup>52</sup> The roots of unquestionable power over museum processes still affects today's modern museums. Like the revolutions which dethroned the aristocracy of Europe, it took the revolutions of the 1970s and 1990s to dethrone the museum aristocracy.<sup>53</sup> According to Weil, the museum world has recently begun to shift into the Museum as Social enterprise.<sup>54</sup> This meant that museums, “would draw its legitimacy from what it does rather than what it is, would seek public support not as a matter of right but by offering to provide the public with value.”<sup>55</sup>

### Change Comes Slowly: Decolonizing and Democratizing Museum Spaces

A paradigm shift is occurring, and museum spaces are beginning to democratize and decolonize. Democratization is the concept that museums can create an equitable space that is accessible to all populations and creates space for disadvantaged populations. Decolonization is the idea of ridding museums of their colonial roots. Paul Sandul, currently an associate professor of history and co-director of the public history graduate program at Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas, states “The intent is to break down societal divisions, especially along the

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 76.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality, through dialogue, exchange, and building trust.”<sup>56</sup> Put more simply, decolonization and democratization are ideas meant to break down historical stereotypes and to connect people to one another. In this way, museums in the modern era can create spaces of healing and learning for society. They redefine the history of western nations to include all populations including refugees.

Modern museums are beginning to move slowly toward the democratization and decolonization paradigm. They are becoming places of dialogue and understanding of our shared human experience. While this is encouraging, other less positive trends accompany this shift. According to Richard Sandell “As crises mount, museum are alarmingly invisible – reluctant to disturb or assert.”<sup>57</sup> Also, over commercialization seems to be accompanying the transition to democratization and decolonization. Sandell asserts that the museum as mall theory, one of the most recent adaptations of museums “...embodies the idea of dead-end of materialism. Over merchandised and devoted to consumption and entertainment. It is the ‘museum as mall’ that underlies our commitment to museum activism, as we believe that the relentless focus on money, consumption, and marketplace ideology continues to diminish the museum as a social institution and a key civic resource.”<sup>58</sup> The problem with this evolution in museology is that it upholds the myth that success and achievement stems from growth in revenue, visitor numbers or physical growth.<sup>59</sup> This thought process ignores the importance of human connection within museums. Sandell states that “The museum community must move beyond the doomed economy of

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Sandul, “Of Sharing Authority and Historic Blocs: Toward New Historiographies of Counter-Hegemony and Community in Nacogdoches, East Texas,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 41 no.3 (2019): 91, doi.org/10.1525/tph.2019.41.3.91.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived.” ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 18.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

industrial growth to the recognition that the connection between individuals, communities, and the natural environment is the key to our collective well-being.”<sup>60</sup>

Moving beyond the concept of the museum as a mall, further steps toward encouraging public engagement and dialogue in exhibit spaces will be important. More specifically, engagement in the process of healing legacies of extraction, colonialism, and inequitable power distributions. During the 1980s and 1990s, governments throughout the world called on national museums “...to play a leading role in seeking to recognize and reconcile difficult pasts.”<sup>61</sup> It is the task of new museology to create spaces of learning and to provide a space of cross-cultural exchange for dialogue. Weil furthers this argument with the assertion that museums “...quintessentially have the potency to change what people may know or think or feel to affect what attitudes they may adopt or display, to influence what values they form.”<sup>62</sup> While the paradigm of museology has begun to shift the legacies of colonialism and inequitable power distribution, much work remains to be done. From a broad perspective, the effects of colonialism are still felt today. According to Amy Lonetree, “Extreme poverty and ongoing colonial oppression permeated tribal life at the time, as it does for many Native people today.”<sup>63</sup> This idea is further reinforced by Bessel Van Der Kolk, a prominent psychologist who focuses on trauma. In his text *The Body Keeps the Score* he states that “...trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by the experience on mind, brain, and body.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived.” ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 2.

<sup>61</sup> Bain Attwood, “Difficult Histories: The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and the Treaty of Waitangi Exhibit,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 35 no. 3 (2013): 48, doi.org/10.1525/tph.2013.35.3.46.

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 39.

<sup>63</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>64</sup> Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014), 21.

Additionally, there has been further research into a new phenomenon called epigenetics which asserts that past traumas alter future generations and affect them down to the genetic level. By engaging with the trauma and unresolved grief in museum exhibits one can help to “begin the healing process.”<sup>65</sup>

To begin to democratize museum spaces, museum spaces must begin to talk about colonialism and power structures regardless of how uncomfortable these conversations may be. As stated in previous paragraphs, change can never be a comfortable endeavor. Lonetree speaks in her text, *Decolonizing Museums*, of telling the hard truths to dismantle the colonial powers of the museum space.<sup>66</sup> “When museums shy away from telling these truths, they limit their capacity to address the historical unresolved grief that is present.”<sup>67</sup> More specifically, an uncomfortable conversation about the history of colonialism must be incorporated into any exhibit about displaced populations. An example of colonialism in museology can be found in the Métis populations and their lack of representation at the Grant-Kohrs historic site in Deer Lodge, Montana. This site interprets the history of John Grant, who was Métis, as being an owner of the ranch. But there is no discussion regarding his Métis roots, which is a vital part of his history. One of the first signs in the historic site which mentions Grant is placed next to the other two later owners of the ranch, who were both Caucasian. This first introduction to Grant in insinuates that he was also Caucasian and not Métis. By not interpreting this side of Grant the site is silencing Métis voices and exerting colonial authority upon the Métis history. Similar to museums there must be a push by the historic sites and their staffs to call out this past

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<sup>65</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 125.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

interpretation and tell the public why Métis were vital to Deer Lodge and how past interpretation was a part of colonialism.

Changing colonial practices in museology also requires coming to terms with the negative practices employed by museums in the past. Traditionally, many museums have been sites of pure anthropological collection for every culture that is non-western. According to Weil “...the era of heroic collecting may well be on the wane.”<sup>68</sup> Collecting for the sake of collecting has dissipated, slowly, but has not fully disappeared. It was not long ago that this collection process and dehumanization of populations was the norm in museology. As Lonetree states, “at the turn of the twentieth century [museums] thought they were in a race against time. They saw themselves as engaged in ‘salvage anthropology’ to collect the so-called last vestiges of a dying race.”<sup>69</sup> Lonetree is discussing Native culture in the U.S. However, this history extends outside of these populations to any so called “endangered” populations which include displaced persons. There are still many museums that seek out these populations and sites in order to collect the history of the site without any interpretation or collaboration from those that are living or have lived their native experience. They seek to collect and preserve the stories of displaced peoples without stopping to ask these populations what they would like their legacy to be. Once again, it is a case of the museum thinking that they have the authority and knowledge to determine what is best for these populations and what would be best suited for a museum. While this has begun to change, it is far from fully disappearing and still holds a large place in the museum field.

Many museums have historically been institutions which are biased by western colonization. Rudiak-Gould makes an assertion which is important for all museums to consider

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<sup>68</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 211.

<sup>69</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 10.

when contemplating the power of western colonization in their spaces “Artists from societies that colonize are presented as individuals with agency to innovate, while artists from societies that are colonized are presented as faceless enactors of a timeless tradition, for which change can arrive only through outside intervention.”<sup>70</sup> In this statement, Gould is referring specifically to art museums. However, it is also applicable to museum spaces that do not deal specifically in works of art. It is a lesson which is important for any museum to keep in mind when considering presenting controversial topics. Objects, stories, and voices from cultures that make up colonized or refugee populations cannot be locked in timeless display cases. Once again, we refer to Rudiak-Gould who states “Putting objects back into contact with people too whom they are most meaningful also has an academic and pedagogical function: it opens access to the wealth of information that these people possess about the objects and ensures that the objects are no longer radically decontextualized as they tend to be in traditional displays.”<sup>71</sup> In short, Gould is identifying that the stories of colonized and displaced persons are living breathing stories.

Engaging with living stories through curation requires museums to involve current events. What value does a museum hold except to engage with the present? There is value in analyzing the past, but only to help with the future. If all we do as a society is view the past as if it is untouchable, are we engaging with history? It is this author's belief that we are not truly engaging with history, but only partially doing so on our own terms.

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<sup>70</sup> Peter Rudiak-Gould, “Peoples Who Still Live; The role of Museums in Addressing Climate Change in the Pacific,” ed. Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin and Kristen Wehner, *Curating the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 70.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Rudiak-Gould, “Peoples Who Still Live; The role of Museums in Addressing Climate Change in the Pacific,” ed. Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin and Kristen Wehner, *Curating the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 72.

Because many people look to museums for guidance and education, the legacy of past mistakes in museum work must be reconsidered. As it stands now, museums are not revolutionary organizations guiding the public to a better future. Dissolution of past mistakes requires an expansion of the concept of new museology and shared authority.

The evolution of museums is defined by the concepts of new museology and shared authority. These ideas must be defined by increased decolonization, increased activism, and ethical solidarity with refugee populations. New museology is centered in the idea of a socially active museum. The museum institution creates healing spaces, cross-cultural connections, and speaks about the hard truths of colonization. New shared authority, which is equally important, emphasizes that much like oral history, museum work is “long haul” work, and because refugee history is traumatic it is important to understand the importance of the flexibility of memory and history. The time for disempowerment and colonialism are long past finished.

Two important concepts should define our field and our practice: Ethical engagement and activism. Through speaking openly and honestly about colonial authority and engaging with displaced populations, museums can co-create spaces of healing and learning. Museums should be spaces that deconstruct traditional power boundaries. They should bridge gaps of knowledge and ignorance, educate, and encourage cross-cultural dialogue. And most importantly, they should be spaces which amplify the voices of groups who are silenced in the historical narrative. Stephen Weil elaborated on these points when he said “...it is difficult to identify many other secular institutions that can play so communally valuable a role for an adult population.”<sup>72</sup> This quote speaks to the social benefits of a museum. It also speaks to the importance of the museum

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<sup>72</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 207.

as a teaching and gathering space. When we create new ethical, active and empathetic museum exhibits, we create fuller and richer sites of learning which benefit everyone.

### Museums as Healing Spaces

Museums are not simply buildings that house old objects. When curated correctly, they can be similar to hospitals, in the sense that they can be living breathing spaces that help to heal past wounds. Following this analogy, those that administrate, curate, and work in museums can be thought of as the doctors and nurses in a hospital. Bessel Van der Kolk, an expert on trauma and the human body and mind tells us that “We have the ability to regulate our own physiology, including some of the so called involuntary functions of the body and brain, through such basic activities as breathing, moving and touching.”<sup>73</sup> Similarly, through the physical act of walking through a museum and connecting to the past and present, we have the ability to help heal trauma from past injustices.

Museums can heal culturally, emotionally, intellectually and physically. However, this healing can only occur from a place of understanding and truth. Lonetree states “...discussing the hard truths of colonization in exhibitions [leads] an effort to promote healing and understanding.”<sup>74</sup> The principles of healing and understanding are key to Amy Lonetree’s *Decolonizing Museums*. The United States colonized Native peoples from the outset of contact, which led to the cultural, physical, and emotional destruction of many Natives. Although

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<sup>73</sup> Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014), 38.

<sup>74</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 25.

museums have begun to decolonize, Lonetree says that these efforts are not enough. Museums must present the hard truths of history in order to facilitate understanding, learning, and healing.

### Museums as Touchpoints for Conversation and Connection

Museums hold the power of connection. This power is intangible, but meaningful. According to Nina Simon “Like libraries, museums are safe spaces for encountering new ideas.”<sup>75</sup> Museums provide visitors the opportunity to engage with ideas, thoughts, and people that they never would have interacted with in their life up to that point. It is in our nature to connect with other humans. It is hard to look at their story, their face, or their life and not be able to empathize with one part or another. This will take some training in historic empathy at the beginning of an exhibit. But when you present someone with a genuine human story in the safe space of a museum, you create an environment that makes it difficult to not connect to that person’s humanity and story. Connection is where a museums’ truest power lies.

Changing the way museums facilitate connection will require more conversations and dialogue. Kathleen Mclean tells us that “At their best, museums are places of inquiry that nourish the exchange of ideas.”<sup>76</sup> This exchange of ideas can be used to change some of the incorrect perceptions that many people hold about refugees. And if each of these people that changed their misconceptions about refugees were to share their new perspective with others it would be truly powerful. As more people open a dialogue about refugees it will give more and more space to these historically silenced voices. As Kathleen Mclean states “...museums are no longer places

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<sup>75</sup> Nina Simon, *Participatory Design and the Future of Museums*, ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 28.

<sup>76</sup> Kathleen McLean, “Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?”, ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 70.

of simple ‘information transmission.’”<sup>77</sup> Instead, as Eleanor Sterling and Erin Betley suggest “Through participatory dialogue processes, museums can inform communities and visitors about key issues and also equip them with the knowledge to participate in public debates.”<sup>78</sup>

“Museum work can be the work of activism.”<sup>79</sup> This simple but poignant statement is the basis for many of the points and positions put forth in this thesis. Museum work can have healing effects which cannot be underestimated. When museum work is not handled with care from an ethical perspective, it can harm entire populations. This harm and trauma can take a very long time to manifest and it can take an even longer time to heal these injustices.

#### Major Hurdles: Loss of Funding, Loss of Power

We claim that museums are spaces for the dissolution of ignorance. Many in academia claim that museums have moved past mistaken past practices into a new bright future. However, as Rudiak-Gould claims, sliding back into past museum practices and habits is a fear which is all too real in the museum world.<sup>80</sup> There are museums which in recent years have begun this back slide. But it must be acknowledged that museums are and have been fighting for decades for financial stability. It is often only the largest and most well supported museums which have the stability and resources to reach their educational goals. It is worth noting that some museums fear losing their already scarce funding from backers that might not agree with the content they

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<sup>77</sup> Kathleen McLean, “Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?”, ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin Filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 70.

<sup>78</sup> Eleanor Sterling and Erin Betley, “Food and Water Exhibitions as Lenses on Climate Change,” ed. Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin and Kristen Wehner, *Curating the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 105.

<sup>79</sup> Jennifer Newell, “Talking Around Objects,” ed. Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin and Kristen Wehner, *Curating the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 44.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Rudiak-Gould, “Peoples Who Still Live; The role of Museums in Addressing Climate Change in the Pacific,” ed. Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin and Kristen Wehner, *Curating the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 70.

are presenting. However, it is our job as public historians and stakeholders in museum spaces to push for change even in museums with fewer resources.

Additionally, museums fear a loss of power. Having control for generations over collections and the stories being presented to the public can be difficult to give up. Stephen Weil states "...power is not always relinquished graciously, even by otherwise gracious museum people."<sup>81</sup> Museums as institutions are slow to change. They give up their power over history and stories reluctantly. Evidence of this emerges in every generation. Whether it be the fear of allowing all populations into these spaces or the fear of relinquishing the power of narrative creation, museums, do not accept change readily. While some of these fears are legitimate, there is rarely change without risk and fear.

Sharing power and authority by engaging with the public will create the space needed to bring more voices and narratives into museums. As author Nina Simon puts it "...pursuing participatory models isn't about letting go of authority of expertise. It's about opening up the institution to the possibilities of what visitors have to offer."<sup>82</sup> This is the value of sharing authority and giving up control of museums. It allows for new and innovative ideas to be introduced. These ideas are what keep museums relevant and help to keep the public engaged and interested in these spaces. This in turn provides greater funding for museums and more educational opportunities for the public. Through engagement with the public and the incorporation of diverse voices into the narrative, museums can create more ethical consumption and demonstration of history and continue to dispel past colonial authority.

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<sup>81</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 88.

<sup>82</sup> Nina Simon, *Participatory Design and the Future of Museums*, ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin Filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 32.

### Bridge Building Challenges: Making the Time to Earn Trust

When trying to create an ethical museum exhibit, the most important factor is to approach displaced peoples which one would demand for one's own cultural voice. In the past, historians have frequently sought to collect voices in the same manner one might collect soil samples for a scientific experiment. Historians and museum workers have sought to collect as many voices as they could because they believed that people such as this were a dying breed or in need of saving. This led to many populations hesitating to trust museums. David Thelen put this lack of trust in numbers during a study conducted in his research, which is outlined in *The Presence of the Past*.<sup>83</sup> Through their studies, both Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig found that in all of the ways their history was represented—oral history, textbooks, media, museums—marginalized populations had a large distrust of museums due to the colonial nature of their relationships with museums. Because of this mistrust there are steps that must be taken by museums to bridge this gap. There needs to be a real push by museums to make displaced peoples feel comfortable in their spaces. By approaching displaced history in a non-extractive manner and making displaced populations more comfortable engaging with museums, one would see more ethical and well-balanced museum exhibits.

Increased collaboration with living, breathing, and current stories should be sought out by museums. Consultation with people in displaced communities is crucial when creating these exhibits. The predominant voices in any exhibit on refugees must be their voices. However, these voices are not always easy to locate. There is often reluctance from refugees to engage in these conversations. It will take the development of real connections with refugee and displaced

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<sup>83</sup> David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig, *The Presence of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 191.

populations to overcome these challenges. According to Jill Mackin, a member of the Turtle Mountain Ojibwa, and a scholar at Montana State University “Building relationships takes time; it does not always happen on your schedule or timeline.”<sup>84</sup> Because of this, museums must have patience and empathy when it comes to exhibit design. Museums like the Museum of the Rockies or Grant-Kohrs should create flexible timelines for the creation of their exhibits which would allow time for greater collaboration with marginalized populations. Similarly, museums need to take the first step in establishing a positive connection by reaching out to displaced and refugee populations.

Once the goal of reaching out to populations has been accomplished, new museum work must shift towards offering technical assistance to these populations. In an article by Kathleen Mclean in the text *Letting Go?* she suggests that museums should move towards being facilitators or technical assistants for community driven projects with diverse populations. She goes on to suggest that these projects should come from the minority community and that the role of the museum professional is to help with tasks such as exhibit design, set up, and the editing of text panels. In her article Mclean states

...this means letting go of the notion that we, museum professionals, are a class apart from our visitors. And we need to find new ways to create narratives in common, narratives that will change over time as the world around us changes. As the news each day reminds us, these are not always easy or comfortable conversations. But they will breathe new life into our museums.<sup>85</sup>

In this statement she asserts that, at their best, museums should be conduits through which communities can present their history to a larger audience. Museum professionals should see

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<sup>84</sup> Jill Mackin, “Narrative of Change,” *Dialogue, Strengthening the Ties That Bind: Public History in Montana*, Bozeman, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Kathleen Mclean, “Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?” ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin Filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 79.

themselves as “...providing technical assistance” on their projects according to Deborah Schwartz.<sup>86</sup> Through providing technical assistance along with opening museum spaces to more collaboration, museums will be able to engage actively with refugee populations.

### Meaningful and Lasting Change Begins from Within

Helping refugees and displaced peoples present their stories will be a welcome change. But this change cannot come from outside of museums. This change will need to come from the inside. Change which is mandated from the outside of an institution is almost always met by hostility and hardship. As Lonetree states, the reason that Native American decolonization has become more successful in recent decades is because Natives are “Seeking to change museums from the inside”<sup>87</sup> It is vital that the perspective of displaced people is the driving force in any exhibit which seeks to represent their history and ongoing challenges. This lesson can be seen in the decolonization of Native driven museum exhibits. Lonetree challenges the authority of Western museums to represent Native American communities without including the Native perspective.”<sup>88</sup> By creating change from within an institution, one creates a more ethical space and helps to shift the industry more rapidly than any number of policies or laws could accomplish.

Solidarity is key to creating change from within museums. Solidarity is the idea of creating community and ally-ship with disadvantaged populations. It is driven by action and moves beyond committing by words alone. Rather than saying a museum is committed to

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<sup>86</sup> Bill Adair and Deborah Schwartz, “Community as Curator: A Case Study at the Brooklyn Historical Society”, ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin Filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 115.

<sup>87</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

refugee populations, museums should shift their mindset to action. It is helping to carry the weight, so to speak, of disadvantaged populations fight for equality. According to Steve Striffler in the past "...solidarity was often passive, and did not seem to produce a critical engagement."<sup>89</sup> Passive engagement and solidarity cannot be the norm continuing forward. By standing in solidarity with disadvantaged populations museums can break from their past and work towards a better future.

In the past, institutional change has occurred primarily in the "safe" spaces of art museums. In an article written by Susanna Lidstrom and Anna Aberg, they ask "Should we settle for the current division between nature and culture, and just let the contemporary art exhibits, with less pressure to get the scientific facts right, deal with the cultural side, and let the aquaria deal with the important scientific stuff?"<sup>90</sup> In this quote both of the authors are discussing climate change and on how the environment is presented in museum spaces. However, the lessons that can be drawn from this quote are important to all museum workers. It is vital that we do not relegate refugee voices, environmental voices, or any other underrepresented voices to art museums. Instead, these topics and voices must be incorporated into the general museum population. It is imperative that natural history and history museums incorporate these voices for any and all visitors.

There are many people and professionals who make a museum function. But clearly one of the most vital people is the curator. The curator is often tasked with the sole responsibility of creating an exhibit in a manner which is interesting to the public. There are certain unspoken

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<sup>89</sup> Steve Striffler, "US Empire, Anti-Imperialism, and Revolution," In *Solidarity: Latin America and the US Left in the Era of Human Rights*, 23. London: Pluto Press, 2019. Accessed June 12, 2020. doi:10.2307/j.ctv9zckcf.5.

<sup>90</sup> Susanna Lidström and Anna Åberg, "Rising Seas," ed. Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin and Kristen Wehner, *Curating the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 239.

rules that they follow, such as keeping the word choice to an eighth grade level and creating a cohesive narrative. While some of these unwritten rules are harmless, some are not. Some rules are rooted in colonial authority. It is these rules that deserve more diligence and additional efforts to eliminate. Museum curation is a profession which relies heavily on one individual to create stories and present histories of many cultures, concepts, and events. Curators are asked to produce multiple exhibits in a single year. This leave very little time for proficiency in any single area. Naturally, they typically don't have adequate time to accurately engage with displaced peoples in order to effectively tell their story. In order to reduce this problem, as Deborah Schwartz suggests, staff and curators of a museum must act as technical assistants for the public in the production of museum exhibits.<sup>91</sup> The museum benefits from this increased level of engagement because if the public helps to produce an exhibit, they will visit in much higher numbers.

#### Persistence: Learning from Failures and Omissions, Expanding Perspectives

Not all museum exhibits which attempt to change and engage the public in new ways will be successful. A recent example is the "Mirroring evil: Nazi imagery" exhibit that opened in the Jewish Museum in Brooklyn. This exhibit presents images of the Holocaust using modern materials such as Legos. It has come under attack by many Holocaust survivors and Jewish community members as being disrespectful and distastefully done.<sup>92</sup> The exhibit is meant to portray an issue that occurred in the past in a modern light in order to continue the discourse on

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<sup>91</sup> Bill Adair and Deborah Schwartz, "Community as Curator: A Case Study at the Brooklyn Historical Society", ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin Filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 115.

<sup>92</sup> Sarah Kershaw, "Exhibition With Nazi Imagery Begins Run at Jewish Museum," *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 18 March 2002, 24 October 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/18/nyregion/exhibition-with-nazi-imagery-begins-run-at-jewish-museum.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/18/nyregion/exhibition-with-nazi-imagery-begins-run-at-jewish-museum.html?_r=0).

the tragedy so that it never occurs again. In a statement from the museum "...the art is supposed to show how evil has been trivialized and fetishized and how artists are using parody and provocation to try to keep the Nazi past alive as an issue for new generations."<sup>93</sup> For this reason, the exhibit itself, while being distasteful in the eyes of some, still holds partial value because it encourages a discussion on past events. Perhaps with a little bit of extra work and engagement this issue of distastefulness could have been avoided? Seeking out the opinions of Holocaust survivors or even active members of the Jewish community could have helped to avoid the backlash this exhibit received. This same lesson can be applied to refugees and displaced persons.

Similarly, many of the ideas of new museology and shared authority are being applied to Indigenous Peoples, African descendant populations, and the environment. When museum activists talk about the future of museums, it is often with statements such as "The new narratives for the 21<sup>st</sup> century will, out of necessity, embrace many issues and many stories, including reducing wealth inequality, protecting Indigenous People's rights, curbing population growth, eliminating the use of fossil fuels, reversing the loss of biodiversity, and eliminating wasteful consumption."<sup>94</sup> However, it is important to add displaced persons and refugee populations to the list of new decolonized narratives for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Museums' lack of engagement is evident in the source-material surrounding activism in museums. For example, Robert Janes and Richard Sandell discuss minority communities and

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<sup>93</sup> Michael Kimmelman, "Jewish Museum Show looks Nazis in the face and Creates a Fuss," *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 29 January 2002, Web, 25 October 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2002/01/29/arts/critic-s-notebook-jewish-museum-show-look-s-nazi-s-in-the-face-and-creates-a-fuss](http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/29/arts/critic-s-notebook-jewish-museum-show-look-s-nazi-s-in-the-face-and-creates-a-fuss).

<sup>94</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, "Posterity Has Arrived." ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 7.

museums they mention First Nations, Inuit and Metis in Canada and people of colour.<sup>95</sup> Not once throughout their piece, which was written in 2019, does it mention refugee populations. Indeed even, “the earliest examples of us-rooted ‘solidarity’ that proposed a different form of social organization, and linked those inside and outside of the United States against empire, were those connected to Africans and Native Americans.”<sup>96</sup> It is time for museums to expand their ideas of decolonization and solidarity to refugee populations.

The following three case studies, from the United States and Europe, provide early examples of expansion of activism, solidarity, and decolonization to refugee populations. Each exhibit gives examples of major and minor exhibits standing in solidarity with refugee populations. They show that the transition of museums into active institutions that are fighting alongside refugees for their equality. The three case studies provide a unique insight into the evolving field of museology as it relates to refugee populations. The goal is to show the work already being done, and to highlight the new practices necessary to creating refugee driven exhibits which create active spaces of healing, learning, and decolonization.

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<sup>95</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived.” ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 6.

<sup>96</sup> Steve Striffler, "US Empire, Anti-Imperialism, and Revolution," In *Solidarity: Latin America and the US Left in the Era of Human Rights*, 23. London: Pluto Press, 2019. Accessed June 12, 2020. doi:10.2307/j.ctv9zckcf.5.

## CHAPTER TWO

## A STORY OF MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION

Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle, Jakelin Caal Maquín, Felipe Gomez Alonzo, Juan de Leon Gutiérrez, Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vásquez, and Carlos Hernandez Vásquez.<sup>97</sup> This is a partial list of names of the children that have lost their lives at the United States border holding facilities since September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Each child had a life, a story, a family, and everything else that comes along with being a human being. They all came to the border and attempted to cross, seeking better living conditions either with their families or without. Each child's voice and story were tragically cut short at the violent Mexico-U.S. border. Their voices have been silenced along with the thousands of other voices which have been lost at this border. Displaced persons such as these children are faced with no choice other than to move to try and cross the U.S. border, even with the significant possibility of losing their lives. They do so out of necessity and often desperation. But, how do we greet these humans seeking to live? With inhumane living conditions, violence, and discrimination. As Reece Jones reminds us, this border violently restricts movement of peoples and "...prioritize(s) citizens' rights over human rights."<sup>98</sup> Instead of welcoming these humans as neighbors, we meet them with disgust and ridicule as if they are nothing more than animals. "Say their name" has become the mantra of world-wide activist movements such as Black Lives Matter. Saying their names is so much more than simply speaking their names, it is signaling to refugee populations that we stand with them and support

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<sup>97</sup> Molly Hennessy-Fiske, "Six migrant children have died in U.S. custody. Here's what we know about them," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (New York, NY: Verso, 2017), 163.

them in their cause. Museums, in the words of Bryony Onciul, are willing to take on the burden of "...righting past wrongs and end the ongoing victimization" of disadvantaged groups.<sup>99</sup> It is overdue that museums stand in activist solidarity with these populations. It is time for a change to this paradigm.

The exhibit "Many Voices, One Nation" at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History has begun the process of decolonization by standing in solidarity with disadvantaged populations. This exhibition is located in the heart of the United States capital of Washington D.C. "Many Voices, One Nation" discusses modern refugees and displaced persons with a focus on the southern border of the United States. The exhibit space incorporates a plurality of voices and employs innovative uses of technology to connect visitors to its content. Using a plurality of voices and innovative technology "Many Voices, One Nation" has begun the arduous process of decolonization. It has signaled to oppressed populations that it is taking the first steps in standing in active solidarity with them. However, "Many Voices, One Nation" has only touched the surface of decolonization. Despite its best intentions, "Many Voices, One Nation" still uses purely academic perspectives and therefore cannot be considered fully decolonized. The exhibit is top-down driven and is self-described as relying on academic perspectives and authors rather than the actual populations contained in the exhibit. Additionally, it does not speak to the hard truths of displaced lives in the United States. Rather, "Many Voices, One Nation" skirts around the edge of telling the hard truths of power dynamics and lauds the good that is being done for and by refugees in our nation. It does not contribute to activism, nor stand in direct solidarity and therefore falls into old habitats of past museums. Because "Many

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<sup>99</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 170.

Voices, One Nation” is contained in the Smithsonian and therefore directs the national narrative of the United States it has a duty to create a fully decolonized space that stands in solidarity with refugee populations.

“Many Voices, One Nation” is located on the second floor of the Smithsonian and is part of a larger exhibit presents United States history from 1492 to the present day. The mission statement of this museum reads “Through incomparable collections, rigorous research, and dynamic public outreach, we explore the infinite richness and complexity of American history. We help people understand the past in order to make sense of the present and shape a more humane future.”<sup>100</sup> According to the curatorial staff “Many Voices, One Nation’ is one of the signature exhibitions in a newly transformed wing of the museum’s second floor. Under the theme, *The Nation We Build Together* “...all the exhibitions on this floor tell the story of America’s founding and future as a country built and building on the ideals and ideas of freedom and opportunity.”<sup>101</sup> This exhibit occupies roughly 30,000 square-feet. It has five separate sections and this chapter will focus on the latter portions of the exhibit including *New Americans*, *Continuing Debates, 1965-2000*, and *Places of Negotiation*. Each of these sections contain debates and information surrounding modern migration and, according to the exhibit “...look(s) at transnational lives through immigrants.”<sup>102</sup> The exhibition space uses eight different multimedia videos and five interactive activities to help visitors explore important questions such as “Who is free?” “Who is included?” and “Who is equal?”<sup>103</sup> Like most institutions, it is a self-

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<sup>100</sup> “Mission & History,” *National Museum of American History* online, Smithsonian, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/museum/mission-history>.

<sup>101</sup> Machado, “Many Voices, One Nation’ Exhibition Opens June 28 at the Smithsonian.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

directed exhibit with plaques, signs, and markers to guide visitors as they explore the important debates surrounding the evolving scope of America. According to the introduction and curation staff, through the 30,000 square-foot space and, “more than 600 museum artifacts, images and about 90 loan objects, this exhibition looks at how the many voices of the American people have contributed to and continue to shape the nation from its earliest beginnings to the present.”<sup>104</sup>

### Exhibit Strength: A Decolonizing First Step

The task of this exhibit and museum is to grapple with the “truths” of American history. Its intent is to celebrate and critique the United States past and present. It is a space where the American public can come together and strive toward a better future. Bain Atwood, a prominent public historian who writes on grappling with difficult histories such as refugee history, asserts that “In the late twentieth century their [national museums’] role become one of telling the nation’s story or more specifically its history, which meant that ‘national identity’ came to be regarded as a national museum’s core business.”<sup>105</sup> Because of this, the role of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History is to create a national history and identity which amplifies the diversity of America. Additionally, it is the role of museums such as this one to produce constructive images that create unity and help build the self-esteem of refugee populations, which is key to long-term decolonization.<sup>106</sup> Through the creation of “Many Voices, One Nation,” this museum has begun the process of decolonization and recreation of national identity which is key to an activist museum.

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<sup>104</sup> Machado, “Many Voices, One Nation’ Exhibition Opens June 28 at the Smithsonian.

<sup>105</sup> Bain Attwood, “Difficult Histories: The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and the Treaty of Waitangi Exhibit,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 35 no. 3 (2013): 48, doi.org/10.1525/tph.2013.35.3.46.

<sup>106</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 196.

The exhibit itself espouses that its directive is to, “take visitors on a chronological and thematic journey that maps the cultural geography of the unique and complex stories that animate the Latin emblem on the country’s Great Seal and the national ideal: *E pluribus unum*, out of many, one.”<sup>107</sup> As described in the previous chapters, museums have historically excluded voices outside the Anglo-Saxon dominant culture. These voices are lost to the annals of history or actively silenced by academia and the systematic colonial oppression which defines so many of our nation’s institutions, including museums. Previous iterations of the exhibit fell into this trapping and in line with Weil’s assertion that museums “...celebrated Western humankind’s place in nature.”<sup>108</sup> The new space moves wholly away from exclusively presenting white colonial history. Instead, through sections like *New Americans*, *Continuing Debates, 1965-2000*, and *Places of Negotiation* voices from diverse groups are given a stage to amplify their stories. It presents the history of diverse Americans of African, Mexican, Asian, and European descent.<sup>109</sup> Unlike the previous iteration of the exhibit titled *A Nation of Nations*, which was opened in 1976 and closed in 1991, and by all regards only grappled slightly with Native American and African American history, “Many Voices, One Nation” sought to and accomplished telling the stories of many groups that make up America.<sup>110</sup> It also tells the ongoing stories and histories of disadvantaged groups in a way that the *A Nation of Nations* exhibit did not. Previously this space suggests the idea that the peopling of North America had largely ended. However, the new exhibit moves away from this idea and speaks to the continued stories and debates surrounding

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<sup>107</sup> Wall Text, *Many Voices, One Nation*, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

<sup>108</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 199.

<sup>109</sup> Wall Text, *Many Voices, One Nation*, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

<sup>110</sup> Margaret Salazar-Porizo and Joan Fragaszy Troyano, “Introduction”, Margaret Salazar-Porizo and Joan Fragaszy Troyano, eds., *Many Voices, One Nation*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2017), 3.

the lives of groups such as refugees. In this way the exhibit has begun to decolonize and create a more equitable history.

Bain Atwood tells readers that a sister museum of this institution, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, is one of the best-known examples of decolonization and managing difficult histories.<sup>111</sup> It appears that during the remodel the Smithsonian National Museum of American History has taken a few of the lessons employed by this museum to heart. According to authors like Sadie Dingfelder, the exhibit space is a brilliant renovation which takes the viewer through the complex plural history of the United States. Public historians and visitors agree that the renovations and the incorporation of a plurality of voices has helped the space to become more engaged. It has begun to reconcile the past traumas of exclusion. In turn this alters the, “construction of the identities by which [community members] become ‘known’ to museum visitors.”<sup>112</sup> Authors like Onciul argue that creating a new national identity or narrative “...help(s) disadvantaged groups, to raise self-esteem and even challenge racism by progressing learning.”<sup>113</sup> Aiding disadvantaged groups in the fight against racism and helping to raise self-esteem are vital to solidarity practices. By creating these changes “Many Voices, One Nation” is signaling its desire to work towards solidarity with disadvantaged populations. Because “Many Voices, One Nation” has moved away from exclusionary actions it is helping to create change and alleviate issues faced by disadvantaged populations such as refugees.

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<sup>111</sup> Bain Atwood, “Difficult Histories: The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and the Treaty of Waitangi Exhibit,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 35 no. 3 (2013): 49, doi.org/10.1525/tph.2013.35.3.46.

<sup>112</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 8.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

Exhibit Strength: Effective Use of Technology

“Many Voices, One Nation” employs innovative technology to humanize refugees’ stories and histories. From the outset the exhibit gives visitors the option of a self-guided tour in English, Spanish, French, German, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean which is available both online and in person. This is followed by tv screens with people of different backgrounds answering questions including: How did we become us? Who is free? Who is included? Who is equal?<sup>114</sup> The use of voices to answer questions instead of just wall text is a continued theme throughout the exhibit. According to scholars Siobhan McHugh, Steven High, and Douglas Boyd the hearing of actual voices has an affective power on a visitor. This is vital to forging long-lasting learning and breathes new life into history and exhibit spaces. Siobhan McHugh asserts “Music elicits a powerful response at a noncognitive, emotional level, a characteristic exploited in diverse musical genres in *Marrying Out*. Much the same can be said for the power of voice (both spoken word and other tonal aspects of voice) and sound more generally.”<sup>115</sup>

Additionally, each of the eight different multimedia videos presents everyday stories of peoples experiences along with videos examining larger themes and trends in migration and movement. This is vital to a decolonized exhibit because as McHugh tells us, “if Person A emits an affect of, say, anxiety, Person B will pick up on that anxiety, but clothe it in particular meaning that relates to Person B’s experiences.”<sup>116</sup> This means that when a visitor views a video

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<sup>114</sup> Guide Book, *Many Voices, One Nation*, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

<sup>115</sup> Siobhan McHugh, “The Affective Power of Sound”, e.d. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 504.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.

they connect to the content and speaker on a human level similar to connect to an in person conversation. This creates a connection which continues far after visitors exit the exhibit space. According to authors like Andromache Gazi, the use of the spoken word forges an emotional response from visitors that connects visitors to the content in a way that written text cannot. Mchugh expands upon this point stating, “As social animals, human beings know instinctively that feeling, mood, and emotion are energetically intertwined.”<sup>117</sup> This is a vital step in creating solidarity with disadvantaged groups in their fight for equality and creates a more active museum and exhibit.

Finally, the entirety of “Many Voices, One Nation” exhibit has been transmitted into an online platform. Having an entire exhibit available online is not common practice amongst museums. It requires vast amounts of time, money, and labor to create virtual exhibits. But when a virtual exhibit is created in tandem with a physical exhibit it leads to greater accessibility for general audiences. This, in turn, creates further dialogue and learning for a broader audience than could ever be accomplished with only a physical exhibit.

### Room for Improvement: Top-down Curation

Although there has been progress and sincere intentions to right past wrongs, the exhibit still falls short in several key regards including top-down driven power dynamics, passive language, the omission of hard truths, and the glossing over of the effect’s colonialism. The exhibit “Many Voices, One Nation” is still a top-down driven exhibit, or an exhibit where the power lies with white western curators, and therefore cannot be considered fully decolonized.

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<sup>117</sup> Siobhan McHugh, “The Affective Power of Sound”, e.d. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 495.

According to resources provided by the curatorial staff, the exhibit and resulting materials are drawn from “Sixteen essays, composed by Smithsonian curators and affiliated scholars.”<sup>118</sup>

Bruce Cole, a prominent professor of American culture and ethics, states that the transformation of this exhibit space “...into an activist institution for social change seems misdirected, to say the least.”<sup>119</sup> The scholarship and exhibit are well done. However, to fully understand the implicit messages of this exhibit it requires the visitor to have a vast understanding of museums and power dynamics. Rabinowitz and Edson appropriately argue that as a visitor walks through a museum space, they should be met with accurate information that explicitly demonstrates the larger themes of the exhibit and honestly presents the subject matter. This idea is further elaborated upon by Amy Lonetree through a question and in her discussion of a gun case housed in the NMAI. She asks, “Should an exhibition require a person to be well schooled in postmodernist theory to engage effectively with the displays?”<sup>120</sup> The answer, unsurprisingly, is no. Herein lies the danger of exhibits which are top-down driven. They are hard to grasp and the lessons that they strive teach are muddled and inaccessible.

In addition to this, an activist museum and exhibit space should be driven by the voices of the peoples whose history is being represented. Bryony Onciul states “It is not enough just to listen; museums need to create relationships built on communication, respect, co-operative action, reflection, equality and reciprocation.”<sup>121</sup> This is the trapping that “Many Voices, One Nation” falls into. By not allowing for refugee stories and voices to be the driving influence of

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<sup>118</sup> Margaret Salazar-Porizo and Joan Fragaszy Troyano, “Introduction”, Margaret Salazar-Porizo and Joan Fragaszy Troyano, eds., *Many Voices, One Nation*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>119</sup> Bruce Cole, “Smithsonian: Still in Shambles,” *Ethics & Public Policy Center* online, EPPC, November 1, 2017, <https://eppc.org/publications/smithsonian-still-in-shambles/>.

<sup>120</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 113.

<sup>121</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 244.

the exhibit, the museum has created a space that is merely upholding the status quo. The “status quo” is currently exhibits where western curators superimpose their own voices over disadvantaged histories. Because of the disorganization and top-down driven nature of the exhibit, “Many Voice, One Nation” cannot be considered a fully decolonized space which has transitioned into an activist institution which stands in solidarity with refugee populations.

#### Room for Improvement: Omission of Uncomfortable Stories and Debates

The “Many Voices, One Nation” exhibit does not contain the hard truths of displaced persons’ stories. The exhibit itself walks the visitor through the history of migration of the United States, starting with those that came before (i.e. Native Americans) and working its way to modern day. The exhibit is divided into four sections *Unsettling the Continent*, *Peopling the Expanding Nation*, *Creating Community*, *New Americans*, *Continuing Debates*, and finally, *Places of Negotiation*. According to Bruce Cole, these sections not only gloss over many of the important debates of the American history, but also lack structure and have fragmented themes.<sup>122</sup> Because the exhibit is so fragmented and chaotic it is not until the third portion of the exhibit that refugees or displaced persons are mentioned. When they are mentioned, there is one heart-warming story of the Fugees, a soccer team composed of refugees in the United States. The exhibit states “The Fugees were among the many new immigrants who contributed to soccer’s rise in popularity in the United States.”<sup>123</sup> Statements like these are common throughout this exhibit and celebrate success stories and individualism of refugees in the United States.

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<sup>122</sup> Bruce Cole, “Smithsonian: Still in Shambles,” *Ethics & Public Policy Center* online, EPPC, November 1, 2017, <https://eppc.org/publications/smithsonian-still-in-shambles/>.

<sup>123</sup> Wall Text, *Many Voices, One Nation*, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

However, there is no discussion of what led these refugees to enter the United States or the discrimination they experience. The Fugees example is an example of past curatorial practices. It shows an example of a curator seeking out a palatable story for audiences to come together behind. This is not to take away from the humanizing aspect of an exhibition such as the Fugees. However, “Tomorrow’s museums cannot be operated with yesterday’s skills.”<sup>124</sup> Museums which have as much visitation as the Smithsonian cannot skirt around the edges of hard truths. A better exhibit would have contained the stories of the Fugees juxtaposed along with the hardships or inequities that displaced persons face within the United States. An ethical exhibit would not implicitly tell the story of refugees as this exhibit does. Rather, the role of the museum should be to counter these ideas and perceptions, to throw them from the window and show that many of these populations and people have no choice in leaving their habitual home. It is the role of museums to show that displaced persons are not any different from ourselves; we simply have the privilege of being born in a country and a demographic which has not faced the same challenges and colonial structures that many of these displaced persons have. In short, an ethical exhibit would celebrate the accomplishments and lives as the Fugees portion does, while simultaneously showing the hard truths of colonization to the viewer and expressing the western power dynamics which lead to the refugee crisis.

#### Room for Improvement: Passive Language and Glossing Over Root Causes

In conjunction with a lack of hard truths, “Many Voices, One Nation” is riddled with passive language. While it shows a rich history of migration in the United States, it avoids the

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<sup>124</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 47.

impacts of colonialism on displaced persons and refugees. Simplicity and passivity of statements according to Onciul “...hides the cause of the effect, removing responsibility for the action.”<sup>125</sup> Take, for example, the portion of the exhibit which discusses artifacts left behind by those trying to cross the border. The language states “Some people without documentation have crossed harsh terrains along the Mexico border to enter the United States. These objects reflect the measures they took to migrate despite treacherous conditions [...] The borderlands show us that multiple stories of racial and ethnic difference make up America.”<sup>126</sup> This exhibit celebrates the cross-cultural exchange which creates a narrative of positivity which paints over the negative history of the border. By using “feel good” stories the exhibit is ignoring the hardships of border crossing and the colonization that accompanies this history.

“Many Voices, One Nation” misses the mark in telling an accurate history. When presenting objects that people left behind while crossing the border it should show examples of who those people are. The use of passive language allows for, “historians to take shelter in passive voice, which permits one to say that ‘a wrong was done’ without naming the culprit.”<sup>127</sup> Or in the case of this exhibit it allows for the historians or curators to completely ignore any wrongdoings on the part of the United States. “Many Voices, One Nation” hints at these hard truths stating, “The U.S.-Mexico border is often portrayed today as a site of sharp political and ethnic divisions. Yet shared history, commerce, and labor contribute to the rich and dynamic culture along the nearly two-thousand-mile border spanning California, Arizona, New Mexico,

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<sup>125</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 172.

<sup>126</sup> Wall Text, *Many Voices, One Nation*, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

<sup>127</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 8.

and Texas.”<sup>128</sup> The quote hints at the hard truths of the power dynamics at the border, but it does not elaborate on the strife and inequitable state power dynamics. In doing so it silences the thousands of voices on the border who have encountered violence from the militaristic United States border control. Through these quotes one can begin to see the dangers of passive voice in an exhibit space. In turn this exerts itself upon displaced persons at the border in the form of dehumanization and oppression.

In the past decade the United States has undergone a strengthening of our borders the likes of which we have not seen since the early 1900s. The United States in the early 1900s, especially 1924, built up Mexico-United States borders and introduced border patrol.<sup>129</sup> Reece Jones states “...the hardening of the border through new security practices is the source of the [structural] violence, not a response to it.”<sup>130</sup> In turn the violence from the United States leads to the dehumanization of displaced persons. The “Many Voices, One Nation” exhibit says nothing about this structural violence and only further reinforces the state-sanctioned violence being perpetrated by the United States against migrant bodies. “Border protection in the United States has evolved since its inception in 1924, but its primary mission remains the same: to guard the nation’s borders and to prevent the unauthorized entry of people and goods into the United States.”<sup>131</sup> The humanization that the Fugees section of the exhibit provides the visitor is a vital first step in becoming an active space in the museum world. However, the exhibit does not illuminate the history of violence, inequitable power, and oppression beside the history of celebration and cross-cultural exchange. More than anything it is an exhibit filled with “fluff”. It

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<sup>128</sup> Wall Text, *Many Voices, One Nation*, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

<sup>129</sup> Wall Text, *Many Voices, One Nation*, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

<sup>130</sup> Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (New York, NY: Verso, 2017), 5.

<sup>131</sup> Wall Text, *Many Voices, One Nation*, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

is not driven by voices of displaced persons, nor does it talk about the hard truths which are key to building an ethical museum exhibit. With some major alterations and changes this exhibit has the potential to become one that frontlines activism and helps to create a brighter future for refugees and the United States.

### Case Study One: Conclusions & Discussion

The United States faces an undeniable truth, that the white and wealthy populations of the country hold the power. It has constructed a nation in which colonialism bleeds into almost every aspect of our lives, including museums. Many museums, such as the Smithsonian exhibit, do not display the whole history of displaced peoples or of any other underrepresented population. Exhibits like this fall into the trap of skirting around the colonial nature of their space, therefore leaving it to the populations affected to try and bring to light these issues. Lonetree discusses another example in the form of an exhibit about the Mille Lacs in which she states “It presents a rich, ongoing history, but it does so in a manner that avoids challenging or difficult topics, specifically the impact of colonialism.”<sup>132</sup> This is often true for exhibits in which the history of displaced populations is presented.

A good museum exhibit invites the museum visitor to, “remember, to discover, and – perhaps above all – to imagine.”<sup>133</sup> To imagine a brighter future or to imagine a world not so divided by strife and hardship. It should show the viewer that the present that they are accustomed to is not the only option. It is through small incremental changes, the world which rests solely in their imagination can bleed its way into our lives. “Many Voices, One Nation” has

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<sup>132</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 35.

<sup>133</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 70.

started the process of decolonization and standing in solidarity with refugees. They have created an exhibit which is burgeoning on co-creation and ethically healing past traumas.

We as a country are standing on a precipice of change. Will we as a nation continue to strengthen our borders and contribute to the thousands that die every year crossing our border? Or will we as a country come together and help preserve human life and help those that are simply trying to survive and make their lives better? The Smithsonian and other museums like it have a key role to play in this debate. The way in which they frame these conversations in the coming years will have a large role to play in how the public views, learns, and engages with displaced persons and their stories. It is up to museums large and small to take an active stance on these issues and tell the hard truths of movement. In doing so we create museums which are not just a part of social change but are spearheading change.

“Many Voices, One Nation” teaches museologists key lessons in decolonization and activism. Its incorporation of a plurality of voices and its innovative use of technology signal that the Smithsonian has created the foundations of decolonization. However, the exhibit needs to emphasize the hard truths of colonization and center more closely on refugee voices in order to be considered an ally to refugee populations.

Perhaps *E Pluribus Unum*, which is highlighted in “Many Voices, One Nation” is outdated, and we must switch to a new phrase. What makes this country great is when we applaud, amplify, and give space for the voices of those who are marginalized. Instead, we should be espousing the idea of *pluribus vocibus sunt robore*; or with many voices, we are stronger.

## CHAPTER THREE

## SMALL INSTITUTION BIG AMBITIONS

“Who Is A Refugee?” was a small temporary exhibit housed in Montana State University’s Exit Gallery. It focused on refugees who were displaced by the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s. The exhibit was conceptualized and developed by a small class with guidance by Molly Todd, a professor who specializes in Latin American history, the goal was to build an exhibit telling the story of Salvadoran refugees. The project came to fruition decades after the civil war occurred when many of the persons who had been displaced were beginning to return to their former places of living in El Salvador.

MSU’s Exit Gallery is a small stark white square space. Each wall contained a different theme centered on the Salvadoran civil war. Wall one which greeted the visitor was a contextual wall, it contained the history of the civil war. Along with the context of the exhibit the contextual wall contained images of the refugee camps and a map of where each refugee camp was located. From the contextual wall the exhibit followed a chronological timeline. The next wall centered on disruption of Salvadoran life. It presented images of protestors, marches, and the disruption of Salvadoran lives by their government. Because refugee voices and stories did not want to emphasize the violence of the conflict the disruption portion of the exhibit is the only section that contained images of violence. This came in the form of three children’s drawings which centered on the destruction of their villages and bombings. From here the exhibit moved to its next theme, adaptation. This portion of the exhibit highlighted refugees performing normal tasks such as sewing, fishing, building, cleaning, and going to school. The refugees in these images are seen in

clean clothes and if one was to view these images without context it would appear that nothing is out of place with this population. The reason that these images were chosen is because an important story that Salvadoran refugees wanted emphasized was not a story of despotism. Rather, they wanted to highlight the resilience of their story. The final wall was titled resilience and resistance. The images contained in this section are not what would be expected of a wall titled resilience and resistance. Instead of being greeted by images of people fighting, the images are of refugees smiling and going about their lives. It includes images of smiling kids playing musical chairs, a pair of women having a laugh while carrying water to their homes, and a group of refugees carrying the Salvadoran flag while singing and smiling. The intention of resilience and resistance was to show visitors that these two words can mean more than traditional understandings of them. For Salvadoran refugees their resistance to their conditions was in living normal lives. When consulting primary documents and refugee voices the curatorial staff found that most refugees spoke to this idea of resistance and the emphasis that theirs was a story of resilience. They did not want to be victimized nor did they want their story to be one of pure tragedy. For the sake of their communities and families they wanted a story that contained smiling, joy, and above all else resilience. In their own minds their story challenged that of a “typical” refugee. Throughout the formulation and construction of this exhibit this idea remained central.

“Who Is A Refugee?” gave visitors an example of what a museum exhibit which centered on solidarity, activism, and community-driven narratives should look like. A massive building or copious amounts of funding are not necessary to standing in active solidarity with refugee populations. Additionally, it shows how small institutions can have a big impact on historic

healing through empathetic museum construction. However, because of the lack of training of student curators, lack of time, and its lack of exploration of the hard truths of this conflict along with the risk of freezing displaced voices in the past the exhibit failed to fully live up to its potential.

Context: Historic US Influence and Interaction with the Civil War in El Salvador

The exhibit “Who Is A Refugee?” came about years after the civil war in El Salvador. During the 1980s and 1990s El Salvador experienced a civil war that was heavily influenced by imperialistic tendencies from the United States. From 1960s onward the United States became a permanent actor in El Salvador and its political scene. This led to a stifling of the voices of the general public while simultaneously endorsing the power of the civil-army regime that had been in control of the country since the 1930s. This is merely a repeat of past events with a colonial power exerting influence and pressure over the government of El Salvador. In turn the US-backed government repressed much of the lower sects of society. It was a war that was fought between federal forces (supported by the US) and lower-class workers, guerrillas and militia. The war itself was long and bloody. It displaced much of the Salvadoran lower class and rural populations and led significant losses. More than 70,000 Salvadorans lost their lives in a country of roughly 5 million people. The war lasted between 1980 and 1992 when it was concluded by peace talks. However, the issues and ideas that were highlighted remained pertinent to modern times. The story of those displaced by the Salvadoran civil war did not end in the 1980s. The country continued to have internal political and environmental issues directly linked to colonial practices from countries such as the United States and Canada.

During the conflict itself, some United States cities and citizens formed relationships with Salvadoran cities and citizens. This alliance between the two populations was called a sister city relationship. The images contained in the exhibit were drawn from photographers who belonged to these organizations and went to El Salvador to help document the lives of refugees. Further than this, the intent of these relationships was for United States citizens to aid Salvadoran populations in their fight. This looked like US citizens involved in these organizations lobbying the United States government to change their policies surrounding El Salvador, collecting supplies for Salvadoran populations, going to El Salvador to “accompany” Salvadoran citizens, etc. The need for accompaniment, which was when a US citizen would walk with a Salvadoran citizen as they engaged in the political realm, came about because of a phenomenon called “disappearing”. Disappearing occurred when the Salvadoran government would apprehend a citizen, they deemed to be subservient. The victim would then be taken to a governmental institution at which point they would be tortured, killed, and buried. From there all record of their life was erased from the country’s archives. It was an institution that was created to instill fear in vast tracts of society.

In much the same way that sister city volunteers escorted Salvadorans through the practice of accompaniment, it is up to the museums to walk hand in hand with displaced peoples and to help amplify their voices and aid in the struggle for equality. Amy Lonetree states “But one of the most important goals, I believe, is to assist communities in their efforts to address the legacies of historical unresolved grief by speaking the hard truths of colonialism and thereby creating spaces for healing and understanding.”<sup>134</sup> Museums cannot shirk their duty in the fight

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<sup>134</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 5.

to create an equal and just world. There is a perception in the US that it is troops that fight to preserve the integrity of our nation and our freedom. But they cannot be the only ones fighting. It is the job of museums in this country to fight for those that cannot or have no opportunity to fight for themselves. This was the altruistic goal of this class in the building of “Who is a Refugee?”. Curators such as these students must shift their mindset in presenting the history of oppressed populations to thinking of themselves less as all-knowing curators, to thinking of themselves as escorts in the dismantling colonial structures.

#### Exhibit Strength: Putting Refugee Voices First

The focus of the exhibit “Who is a Refugee?” was to look deeper into the experiences and resilience of these refugees. Around 1.5 million citizens of El Salvador were displaced during this conflict which constituted one-fourth of the total population. The refugees themselves fled to places such as Guatemala, Honduras, Panamá, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Canada and the United States. Many of the images in this exhibit came from the Mesa Grande camp in Honduras which contained just a portion of these refugees. The hope of this exhibit was to challenge the traditional views held by western populations about refugees and to show that the displaced persons from El Salvador were able to band together in order to create communities that were both productive and functioning within their camps. Although much of the population was displaced during this conflict, through their resilience they were able to create a community. This is best shown in the images centered on children. Two examples best exemplify this idea. The first is an image of kids in school. In this color image, which has children seated at desks with one writing on a blackboard, one can’t help but have the gut reaction that this not a refugee

camp.<sup>135</sup> Western thought teaches us that a refugee camp doesn't contain images like this of children learning. The second image is a black and white photo of four kids playing musical chairs with their peers and some adults gathered watching the proceedings. No one in the image is dirty and the image looks like it could have been plucked from anywhere in the world.<sup>136</sup> Most importantly, both of these images deny the victimization of these populations and show people smiling or doing things which western thought does not consider to be a part of the story of refugees. This is the power of "Who Is A Refugee?" By centering on the amplification of refugee voices and stories the exhibit created an activist and ethical exhibit.

"Who is a Refugee?" was a refugee driven exhibit which did not fall in line with traditional stories of displaced persons. It demonstrated many of the qualities of an ethical exhibit which aligns itself with solidarity activist movements and modern museological practices. The exhibit and class fully embraced the "messiness" of museum exhibits and their contested nature. The curatorial staff understood that "The recognition of museums not as neutral objective venues of historical truths, but as political and social constructions of the world based on particular viewpoints, has opened the doors to a greater understanding of the importance of museums today to the societies and communities that support them and are collected by them."<sup>137</sup> Each student involved understood that this exhibit was an attempt to amplify traditionally silenced voices. The curatorial staff embraced "...that the connection between individuals, communities, and the natural environment is the key to our collective well-being."<sup>138</sup> By centering everything in the

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<sup>135</sup> Photo, "Who Is A Refugee?" Exit Gallery, Bozeman, Montana.

<sup>136</sup> Photo, "Who Is A Refugee?" Exit Gallery, Bozeman, Montana.

<sup>137</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 6.

<sup>138</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, "Posterity Has Arrived." ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 7.

exhibit exclusively around refugee voices and stories, creation of an activist exhibit was made possible.

The goal of “Who is a Refugee?” sought to keep the voices of displaced persons as the focal point of the museum exhibit. Using primary source documents and oral histories, the class was able to divine that theirs was a story of resilience and resistance. Through the oral histories and other primary resources this class was able to construct an exhibit which put displaced voices first. It did not highlight starving children, nor did it show many of the hardships of the war that Salvadorans faced. That would not have been an ethical exhibit; it would have sought to accomplish a goal through means that would not have been moral. This is because it would have highlighted a story that refugee populations did not want as the central theme to this exhibit. Instead it showed the resilience of the Salvadoran people without resigning them to the status of victim. The four walls of the exhibit each highlighted quotes from displaced persons along with images of these people and their new homes. Each quote was drawn directly from primary sources and the refugees themselves and centered on their stories. It was an exhibit which centered on an alternative narrative to traditional representation of displaced persons. In this way the exhibit reflected and amplified the voices of those that this project was focused.

“Who is a Refugee?” stood in solidarity with displaced populations. In the broadest sense Anouk de Koning and Edwin de Jong, two prominent solidarity theorists, “...take solidarity to connote a recognition of communality or fellowship, and the willingness or obligation to act upon this recognition”<sup>139</sup> Simply put it is the effort by allies, usually white, in positions of power to amplify and help bear the burden of past and current injustices. “Who is a Refugee?” centered

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<sup>139</sup> Rasch, Elisabet Dueholm, and Pooyan Tamimi Arab. "Introduction: Solidarity." *Etnofoor* 29, no. 2 (2017): 8. Accessed June 12, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/26296166](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26296166).

on this idea and the curatorial staff strived to meet this ideal in their actions. From the exhibit's denial of victimization of Salvadoran refugees to the images used in the exhibit space, each action was implemented without the curatorial team's needs in mind but rather centered on the needs and wants of the refugee voices. An example of the connections created by this exhibit lies in the postcards at the end of the gallery. Following a visitor's viewing of the exhibit they were invited to take a post card and answer the following question: "What does home mean to you?"<sup>140</sup> The instructions invited visitors to either hang up their card or drop it in a basket to be collected and hung up later. This created a personal connection between refugee voices and visitors. It is this personal connection that drives people to seek to become allies of disadvantaged groups and to seek out change. By forging a personal and emotional connection between these groups the exhibit made solidarity unavoidable. Elena Mamoulaki asserts that solidarity movements should "...resist the temptation to interpret them through the lens of values of political opportunism, economic maximization and contemporary political interest."<sup>141</sup> "Who is a Refugee?" created a space which was free to access and did not have ulterior political motives. The overarching goal of the museum was to create an exhibit which amplified the stories and voices of the refugees and created connections between these stories and visitors. By focusing exclusively on refugee voices and stories without ulterior motives, this exhibit stood in solidarity with disadvantaged populations.

Seeking out refugee voices and stories was a crucial first step. Traditionally, disadvantaged populations have had to fight for a place in museums. Viet Than Nguyen claims,

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<sup>140</sup> Brochure, "Who Is A Refugee?" Exit Gallery, Bozeman, Montana.

<sup>141</sup> Rasch, Elisabet Dueholm, and Pooyan Tamimi Arab. "Introduction: Solidarity." *Etnofoor* 29, no. 2 (2017): 8. Accessed June 12, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/26296166](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26296166).

“It should not purely be the burden of victims to remember the injustices done to them. Placing the weight of memory solely on these injured parties would encourage them to see themselves only in terms of victimization.”<sup>142</sup> This exhibit did not require refugee populations to reach out to this gallery or class. Instead the exhibit and students involved in its construction helped bear the mantle of remembrance of the El Salvador civil war and the displacement it caused.

### Exhibit Strength: Creating a Sense of Hope, Strength, and Connection

The job of displaying controversial topics or the voices of refugees should never fall solely on these populations. This is one of the main arguments that one hears from the far-right on why such ideas should not be displayed in museum spaces. They state that America is a free nation and people in these oppressed populations have the same right as anyone else to display or attempt to display their voices. However, there is a vast chasm between the right to do this and the ability to do so. In line with Nguyen’s aforementioned assertions it should not be on refugee populations to bear their victimization. This is one of the most vital things that a museum space should avoid. When you categorize an entire population as victim, or even an individual as such, you take away their ability to see themselves as an active agent in their own life. You are sorting them into a category which is nearly impossible to drag oneself out from and takes generations of healing to recover. Additionally in doing so, refugees or any other population is then “...treated as objects of pity, the temptation for victims is to mistake their otherness as their sole identity.”<sup>143</sup> Because of this, to leave the burden of fighting to display one’s voice for all to hear up to oppressed populations should never be the goal of a museum.

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<sup>142</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen *Nothing Ever Dies* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 68.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

Community building and coming together is vital to healing traumas. Bessel Van Der Kolk states that the key to healing from PTSD is “Restoring relationships and community is central to well-being.”<sup>144</sup> Connecting oneself to a community is vital for any human being, we have developed to be social creatures regardless of what American individualism might lead us to believe. “Who Is A Refugee?” spoke to community building and how it could heal traumas. Museums can create community. Allowing displaced persons to represent their story in the museum can help to bring together groups of people. However, it creates community in a way that possibly includes more groups than simply “refugees.” When done properly, it can bring together groups both from displaced communities and from non-displaced communities. Humans are inherently social creatures; we crave and need community. Without it, studies find that we as a species have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and many other mental health issues. Charlotte Coates, a specialist who has worked extensively in the arts and cultural spaces states,

Studies have shown that social isolation has a serious impact on physical health. One piece of research found that loneliness can cause a comparable amount of damage as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Social isolation affects mental health too. Loneliness can lead to an increased risk of depression. Lonely people have a 64% increased chance of developing clinical dementia. Making meaningful connections with other people is vital. Positive social interactions are a key part of health and wellbeing.<sup>145</sup>

Coates, among many other museum professionals, claim that museums are key to battling loneliness and social isolation. They are a safe space for people of a variety of backgrounds to come together and open a dialogue. The strength of this specific portion of the exhibit was the cross-cultural ties it elicited in the United States. By creating an exhibit centered on the

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<sup>144</sup> Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014), 38.

<sup>145</sup> Charlotte Coates, “Loneliness and Social Isolation – How Can Museums Help?” *MuseumNext*. AAM, March 21, 2019, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/loneliness-and-social-isolation-how-can-museums-help/>.

communities of El Salvador, “Who Is A Refugee?” helped to create a base of solidarity in another city in the United States. Had this exhibit moved or been replicated in different cities this author asserts that additional solidarity would have occurred in other cities. The power of connection lies in the creation of bonds which reach across international or cultural borders. Because of this, creating community through museum exhibits is fundamental to creating cross-cultural ties and healing past traumas.

Additionally, images chosen for “Who is a Refugee?” spoke to the community-building of this exhibit. The images portrayed the refugees as a cohesive community that is anything but downtrodden. This image helps to give the viewer the sense that there was community within these refugee camps and that it was not as depressing as one might believe it to be. Quotes and ideas presented such as these run counter to a portion of Onciul’s assertion that, “. . .present(ing) a positive message of current day cultural strength [...] underplays current difficulties”<sup>146</sup> This argument is vital to creating community, solidarity, and decolonization of museums. Because students and the exhibit focused on images which spoke to the community-building of refugees and their resilience, decolonization was much more successful. Indeed, many of the images that were chosen for the exhibit were selected because they created a bond with the viewer and the refugee that does not allow for the viewer to ignore the conflict any longer. In turn, this created an international community bond which is vital to developing transnational solidarity. Careful thought put into image selection, along with refugee voices, created transnational community which is vital to solidarity.

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<sup>146</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 179.

Exhibit Weaknesses: Significant Omissions Regarding Historic Context and Influence of Colonial Systems

“Who is a Refugee?” was a far cry from a perfect museum exhibit. For all its strengths in the realm of representation and centering around displaced voices, it lacked in a few key areas. The project was a small undertaking and lacked in preparation time, funding, and in-depth experience in decolonization of museum spaces. Given more time, space, and funding this project could have turned into a truly great exhibit.

The exhibit did not express the hard truths of colonization and the effects of outside sources on the El Salvador civil war, which would have been important to understanding the context of why people were displaced in the first place. Exhibits which present the history of displaced populations often speak of how terrible the conditions in said persons’ country may be or of what forced the person to relocate. What they often miss is the power structures that exist that caused the issues in their home countries to begin with. Take, for example, the refugees that streamed out from El Salvador during the 1980’s. It would be easy to build an exhibit showing the atrocities committed by the government of El Salvador. A museum would have an easy time showing how the government “disappeared” its own people, oppressed them for years, and stripped them of their rights, which in turn led to many attempting to flee their country. Each of these points would be justified in putting in a museum exhibit and warranted. However, the museum exhibit would also need to contain the fact that following the 1960s, the United States became a permanent actor in El Salvador and its political scene. This led to once again stifling the voices of the general public, while simultaneously endorsing the civil-army regime that had been in power since the 1930s. It would need to speak of how this cycle is merely a repeat of

past events with a colonial power exerting influence and pressure over the government of El Salvador. In turn this led to people rising to power like the president of El Salvador, José Napoleón Duarte, who repressed much of the lower classes of society which led to many persons fleeing the country and therefore becoming displaced. By showing not only how the people of El Salvador were repressed by their own government but also by the colonial nature of El Salvador's relationship to the United States, one could create a richer and more ethical museum exhibit.

“Who is a Refugee?” did not speak to the neo-liberal policies implemented by the United States which helped to spur the conflict and the displacement of Salvadoran civilians. It did not tell visitors that the Reagan administration spent close to six billion dollars on the conflict in El Salvador in order to attempt to defeat the revolutionary group FMLN, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, who were fighting for basic human rights. The amount spent by the United States government was close to double the annual GDP of El Salvador which during this period was roughly 3.5 billion dollars. This was a conflict that was largely directed at the lowest sectors of society, the US and the government of El Salvador starkly outmatched the capital power of the FMLN. In almost every way the El Salvadoran government, outmatched the FMLN whether it be capital, arms, or resources at large. Nonetheless, the FMLN persisted in its fight in order to draw out the war until in 1992. At that time, the Salvadoran government was forced to sign peace accords with the rebels and the FMLN became a legitimate political party. The exhibit did not speak to the systematic forms of fear that were condoned by the government such as “disappearing”. According to one rebel leader Nidia Diaz, “The fact that I was not disappeared

was an exception to the rule.”<sup>147</sup> Had “Who Is A Refugee?” presented this history it would have further increased healing from these injustices.

#### Exhibit Weakness: Risk of Freezing Refugees in a Single Narrative

Exhibits such as “Who Is A Refugee?” risk freezing displaced stories and only telling half a story. Refugees and their stories are not faultless. By idealizing refugees, or any controversial topic for that matter, one is “...freezing them in perpetual suffering and noble heroism.”<sup>148</sup> In doing so, a museum is only telling half the story. A common example of how this can become harmful to populations is native voices in the United States. For decades Native Americans were displayed as “noble savages” by many museums. They were seen by the public as people connected to the land with a culture so unlike our own that it was nearly impossible to understand it. This was due, in part, to many museums displaying Native history only through the 1800s. In doing so these spaces kept natives frozen in the past with no hope of every holding relevance in modern society. It was not until recently that museums began to integrate Native American history into all modern museum spaces. Mark Klempner expands upon this idea in his assertion that by idealizing one history over another scholars and museums replace one history for another which does not create a holistic museum exhibit.<sup>149</sup> Museums cannot freeze the stories of displaced persons in the past or in a set period and make the same mistakes that they made with Native populations. This will be more of a challenge going forward as we spatially move further from the actual displacement events. However, the lessons which Native American

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<sup>147</sup> Nidia Diaz, *I Was Never Alone*, (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, 1992), 151.

<sup>148</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen *Nothing Ever Dies* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 74.

<sup>149</sup> Mark Klempner, “Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma,” *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 27 no. 2, (2000): 70.

exhibits have taught us in this subject are of the utmost importance to exhibits on displaced persons.

“Who Is A Refugee?” failed to break from this vulnerability. The exhibit focused solely on the past resilience of Salvadoran refugees and their struggles. The way that the exhibit was framed locked the story wholly in the 1980s and did not discuss any of the ongoing resilience or issues faced by these displaced populations. There were no photos, quotes, or materials included in the exhibit space which fell outside of the 1980s timeframe. Though this was a weakness of the exhibit, because it was only on display for a short period of time many of the issues that arise for an issue of this nature were avoided. Additionally, had the exhibit had more room to expand the curatorial staff would have worked to place these stories and their relevance into a modern context.

#### Exhibit Weakness: Size and Funding Limitations

Significant change cannot come solely from students within a university setting. For all of its strengths “Who Is A Refugee?” accumulated only 432 visitors during its duration.<sup>150</sup> This pales in comparison to the magnitude of visitors at major museums. These ideas and changes must occur in every sector of museology and society.

The main inhibitor of telling hard truths in this exhibit was the physical space it occupied. “Who Is A Refugee?” was housed in a small gallery on Montana State University’s campus which limited the focus of the exhibit. In an ideal world, this exhibit would have spanned several rooms which would allowed space for student curators to address the context of the war and the

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<sup>150</sup> Mirandi Bakken, email to author, June 17, 2020.

hard truths of this conflict. Then visitors could have moved to rooms which highlighted and amplified the voices of those displaced by this conflict. As anyone that works in the museum world is aware, we operate in a less than ideal world. A choice was made during the construction of this exhibit that the focal point would be the voices of those displaced. Thus it would be a story, not of hardship, but of resilience and perseverance. This should always be the case when building exhibits which focus on any controversial topic or human story. It should be the voices of those in that history which define the exhibit and hold the power behind what is presented. In this way we can create a more ethical museum world in which equality is the driving force of museology.

“Who Is A Refugee?” lacked in time, funding, and a vital element of in-depth experience in decolonization of museum spaces. According to Bryony Onciul, some of the dangers which face an exhibit when attempting to decolonize include “...a lack of financial resources; pressure to meet professional standards; visitor expectations and arguably political pressure.”<sup>151</sup> While each of these were potentially risks I believe that only the first two truly influenced this exhibit. The exhibit itself, because it was a part of an undergraduate seminar, suffered from a lack of funding. Students were unpaid and materials were limited. Therefore, it was a challenge for the exhibit to live up to its full potential. Some of the main inhibitors to a fully successful exhibit included the class only meeting once a week and a lack of cohesion between students and their different museological theories.

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<sup>151</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 148.

### Case Study Two: Discussion & Conclusions

We face an undeniable truth in our country that the white and wealthy populations of the United States hold the power. According to the American Alliance of Museums and Richard Sandell, “Museums are the most trustworthy source of information in America – rated higher than local papers, nonprofits, researchers, the U.S. government, or academic researchers.”<sup>152</sup> Put simply, many people throughout the US and the world trust that museums present factual information. For a vast array of reasons, from entrenched colonial systems to funding and space issues, museums often fall far short of that expectation.

The US and western countries have constructed nations where colonialism bleeds into almost every aspect of their lives, including museums. Indeed, many museums, which display the history of displaced peoples or of any other underrepresented population often fall into the trap of skirting around the colonial nature of their space. This then leaves it to the populations affected to try and bring to light these issues. Lonetree discusses one such exhibit about the Mille Lacs in which she states, “It presents a rich, ongoing history, but it does so in a manner that avoids challenging or difficult topics, specifically the impact of colonialism.”<sup>153</sup>

“Who Is A Refugee?” struggled with and fell short in countering these systemic realities. However, while this small exhibit lacked preparation time and funding, it did break from one of the most dangerous myths in the museum world: the fixation on material resources. According to Richard Sandell, “One toxic expression of this material fixation is the incessant talk of shortage in the museum world – be it money, staff, technology, or public support, and this self-limiting

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<sup>152</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived.” ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 6.

<sup>153</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 35.

refrain continues. We reject this thinking, as perceived shortages of all kinds have become the overriding excuse for maintaining the status quo in museum practice.”<sup>154</sup> However, the exhibit and curatorial staff did break from the status quo. The exhibit reflected the idea that “Museums already have a boundless capacity to act with intelligence and sensitivity – money is not required to do this.”<sup>155</sup> Greater funding and time would have led to a more successful exhibit. However, it is vital that we consider “...what the work of museums should be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>156</sup> It is better that a museum exhibit “flops” somewhat rather than not trying at all. The only way to change the paradigm of museology is to take risks and chances. “Who Is A Refugee?” did this. Though it did not live up to its full potential, the curatorial staff did not let a lack of funding and time restrict their intent of creating an ethical exhibit.

Although “Who Is A Refugee?” does not always speak to the hard truths of colonization, it shows the museum world that empathetic and forward-thinking museum construction does not require mass amounts of funding nor a fancy building. “Who Is A Refugee?” shows the early foundations of an ethical space centered on refugee voices. The exhibit provides an example of a space that is committed to solidarity, activism, and community-driven narratives

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<sup>154</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived.” ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 2.

<sup>155</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived.” ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 2.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## MIGRATION MOVES THE MINDSET

Imagine for a moment that you are a displaced person fleeing a conflict or simply seeking a new and better life. You make the dangerous journey of seeking out a smuggler who cares little for your life or that of your family. You fork over the last of your funds in order to embark on a journey to a new country. The beginning of this journey is the easy portion. You set out on a boat which is under-maintained and has little food, water, or fuel on board. The provisions are just enough to begin the journey. From here, you embark upon an unpredictable sea which is turbulent and choppy. Your boat is not made for a sea such as this and seems underqualified to be floating even on a placid lake. However, this is your chance at a better life. As your boat nears the European mainland and the promise of asylum and a better life, you are met with sea barriers that threaten to sink your boat and ruin your chances. Let's say that you are one of the lucky boats and you make it to the shores of the asylum country. Your journey is far from done at this point. From here you undergo an intense vetting process and are sorted into refugee camp where you will spend months in a temporary living quarter that has little protection. You suffer police brutality, hunger, and general oppression. If you lucky and do qualify to enter the country, you are then met by more discrimination and a lack of economic opportunity with little way to remedy these issues. The journey of a displaced person is long, arduous, and without respite.

Scenarios such as this are the everyday norm for many families and individuals fleeing to Europe for a variety of reasons. Modern refugees and displaced persons policies grew from post-WWII Europe and are inextricably linked with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and

the Geneva Convention.<sup>157</sup> In the past decade, Europe has experienced an influx of refugees the likes of which has not been seen since WWII. In 2016 it was estimated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that there were nearly 5.2 million refugees and displaced persons that reached Europe's shores.<sup>158</sup> Frontex, a European agency tasked with coordinating and developing European border management plans, estimates that "one out of every four people who attempted to enter Europe by boat dies en route."<sup>159</sup> Indeed, "In 2018, more than 138,000 people risked their lives trying to reach Europe by sea; more than 2,000 of them drowned."<sup>160</sup> It should be noted that though these statistics seemingly contradict one another there is a large discrepancy between the number of reported deaths versus actual deaths. These statistics have grown exponentially since the beginning of the refugee crisis in Europe in 2011.

The current refugee crisis has led to an influx of displaced people in Europe that affects all European countries. This crisis in Europe is likely to continue. Physical violence, intellectual violence, discrimination, oppression, deadly conditions, economic hardship, and many other obstacles are hallmarks of the "refugee experience" in Europe. No longer can European museums take a passive stance on migration and displaced persons. As the number of displaced persons increases year to year, it is up to European museums to actively engage with displaced persons, to take a stance and hold their ground in order to dispel the obstacles faced by refugees in Europe.

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<sup>157</sup> Liisa Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From "Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 495-523, Accessed March 22, 2020, [www.jstor.org/stable/2155947](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155947).

<sup>158</sup> "Refugee Crisis in Europe," *UNHCR*, Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/refugee-crisis-in-europe/>.

<sup>159</sup> Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (New York, NY: Verso, 2017), 26.

<sup>160</sup> "Refugee Crisis in Europe," *UNHCR*, Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/refugee-crisis-in-europe/>.

Whereas the previous case studies highlighted exhibits in the United States that made important steps toward decolonization, we look to Europe for an even stronger example. More specifically, this chapter focuses on Munich, Germany, and the Munich Stadtmuseum. Visiting the museum, one is greeted by what appears to be a regular white history of the city of Munich: how it developed, the significant accomplishments and events that occurred in the city, major works, and important people from Munich. However, in 2015, amidst the largest refugee crisis in Europe, the museum and curatorial staff initiated the “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” (Migration Moves the City) project, which sought to “Investigate the past and present of migration in Munich since 2015 and collecting associated objects.”<sup>161</sup> The museum put out a call for objects, artifacts, and stories associated with migration and refugees to the communities of Munich. Museum staff travelled to the neighborhoods and homes of those who had responded and sought to engage these voices and populations on their own terms. In much the same way the Kathleen Mclean suggests “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” set up public workshops throughout the city in order to collect any stories or objects which people who had been displaced would be willing to share. This is one of the lessons that museums must draw from Munich. The curatorial staff of the Munich Stadtmuseum actively sought displaced voices in their city and engaged with these voices. The development of the exhibit took five years and, because they did not rush the project the curatorial staff, signaled to refugee and migrant communities that the museum was committed to ethical presentation of their stories.

The resulting exhibit was opened permanently in 2020. Titled, “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt”, it juxtaposes traditional white colonial history and the perspective of displaced and

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<sup>161</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

migrant voices. It shows the past and present of migration, and the project does not focus on one particular group nor race. Instead the project seeks to amplify the stories and voices of all those that have migrated or been displaced and sought refuge in Munich. The exhibit description then goes on to state why this project is vital for the people of Munich: “Immigration is so central to Munich’s past that both institutions [The Munich City Archives and the Munich City Museum] have now adopted a long term strategy to embed the history of migration prominently in their work.”<sup>162</sup> In this way they began the lengthy process of decolonization, becoming active, and helping to heal past traumas.

They adhered to Bryony Onciul’s argument that, “Engagement has real consequences for the community and should only be entered into genuinely and with sufficient time and resources to honour community contributions.”<sup>163</sup> Onciul expands on this idea and states that museums must develop relations slowly so as to build trust with communities. “By developing relations slowly over time, [...] showed the community their personal commitment and the museum’s commitment to partnership and power sharing. This helped to overcome negative feelings the community held towards museums.”<sup>164</sup> From the outset, “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” created equitable power dynamics with migrant communities through centering on their voices, showed a willingness to put in the long-haul work required for decolonization to create spaces of healing, employed innovative technology to aid in decolonization, and signaled commitment to becoming an active museum space.

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<sup>162</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

<sup>163</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 71.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Exhibit Strength: Letting Refugee Voices Take the Lead

“Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” places refugee and migrant populations as the protagonists of their own stories, and their ideas and voices are central. This is the strongest part of the exhibit. Out of the three case studies explored in this thesis, this exhibit is the most refugee driven space. Because the curators and museum spent over five years gathering artifacts and stories before opening the exhibit, they allowed for many diverse voices to engage with the project. According to the opening panel of the exhibit “They [curators] have drawn on participatory public events such as the ‘museum lab’ in the Westend neighborhood in 2017 to rewrite the prevailing official line on migration and help place its real protagonists at the center of the story.”<sup>165</sup> In doing so, the curatorial team sought to share authority with refugee populations. An example of this comes from the panel and mini exhibit titled “In Central Station”.<sup>166</sup> This panel tells the story of Dimitri Soulas who had been exiled by the military dictatorship in Greece. After being exiled Soulas built a new life for himself in Munich and became a photographer.<sup>167</sup> He tells his story and other refugee stories through photos most of which are on display in a case above his text panel. Though his voices is only present briefly in the actual text panel, his images are his voice and through them he is able to tell his story and keep his own voice central.

In addition to placing refugee voices as the focal point, curators identified and circumnavigated the ebb and flow of differential power dynamics. Scholar Katrine Barber

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<sup>165</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

<sup>166</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

<sup>167</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

emphasizes that it is in this shared authority that the three keys to decolonization and solidarity can occur. The three keys include, shared authority, contact zones — i.e. social spaces in which cultures can come together to meet and grapple with each other in the context of highly asymmetrical power relationships — and survivance or the idea of denying victimization and presenting these stories in a more holistic form.<sup>168</sup> By placing refugee voices central and creating the necessary conditions to meaningfully engage with these voices, the Munich Stadtmuseum signaled and continues to signal to refugee populations that it is an active space standing in solidarity with disadvantaged populations.

#### Exhibit Strength: Diverse, Intersectional Identities and Active Language

In addition to placing refugee voices central to the exhibit, "Migration Bewegt Die Stadt " does not focus on one group or race. Stories from Turkish, Iranian, Greek, and many other populations can be found throughout the exhibit. One example of a Turkish refugee's story comes from the panel titled "French lace wedding dress".<sup>169</sup> This story is of a young woman who donated her mother's wedding dress. However, the true story is describing much more than the dress. The focal point of the panel is of her being brought to Munich from Turkey by her parents to seek a better life and becoming a director of a Munich kindergarten.<sup>170</sup> Immediately following this panel is the story of Czech worker and their displacement and subsequent involvement in the Czech sports and cultural association in Munich.<sup>171</sup> This focus on different groups, creeds, ethnicities, races, and genders is vital to creating an intersectional activist space. No activist

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<sup>168</sup> Katrine Barber, "Shared Authority in the Context of Tribal Sovereignty: Building Capacity for Partnerships with Indigenous Nations," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 35, no. 4 (2013): 20-39, DOI: 10.1525/tph.2013.35.4.20.

<sup>169</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

<sup>170</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

<sup>171</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

movement nor group should focus exclusively on one specific group or type of person. Rather, curators created an exhibit which is not black and white but leans into the gray areas of refugee history. Put simply, the curators created an exhibit that gave all lived refugee experiences space and placed them in equitable positions. As author Anna Sheftel suggests this is the most vital part of historiography.<sup>172</sup> When an exhibit delves into the gray area of presentation, a fuller and richer exhibit is created. Learning by visitors therefore becomes more meaningful.

The space that houses the exhibit speaks to its commitment to decolonization and activism. According to descriptions of the exhibit by the curator,

A total of 15 exhibition stations feature objects that represent the past and the present of migration in Munich and invite visitors to adopt a new perspective. In addition, each of these stops has a tablet so that visitors can interact with additional objects and digital content related to that particular station. The exhibition texts and the additional interactive material have been translated into English and Modern Standard Arabic with a view to reaching the widest possible audience.<sup>173</sup>

Each of these main stations, along with the many other sub-stations, are integrated into the overall exhibit. In addition to the integration, bilingual tours are offered German/English, German/Arabic, German/Greek, German/Italian, German/Croatian and German/Turkish. Just as one was reading about a significant event about white history in Munich, in the very next text panel one might be met with an object and story of migration to Munich. "Migration Bewegt Die Stadt" blends the voices of migrants and refugees into the overall history of the city of Munich.

The exhibit uses a plurality of voices and active language, which are hallmarks of museum activism. Donna Graves and Gail Dubrow, both scholars of intersectionality in historic preservation and public history, speak to the importance of plurality in museum exhibits: "By not

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<sup>172</sup> Anna Sheftel, "Embracing the Mess: Reflections on Untidy Oral History Pedagogy," *The Oral History Review* Vol. 46 no. 2, (2019): 344.

<sup>173</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

fully addressing the intersectionality or polyvocality of most histories of a place, important aspects of experience are silenced and erased, even in projects with the best intention of fostering diversity.”<sup>174</sup> An example of this playing out in the “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” exhibit comes from the video “The Danger of a Single Story.” In this recording of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie she gives a “passionate plea for the acceptance and valuation of diversity, and a rebuff to all forms of cultural paternalism.”<sup>175</sup> Museum labels such as these are spread throughout the exhibit and speak to the plurality of voices which are being amplified within this space. It is not the case that one group is given more space than another. Rather, they are all given space and integrated. This expresses the complex history of Munich and in doing so the museum is not simply replacing one history with another. Additionally, through labels such as “You’ll Eat What You’re Given by the Authorities,” the active voice is central to this exhibit. The panel reads “Until 2014, the law in Bavaria stipulated that refugees should receive two food packages a week. Prior to 2006, the contents were determined by authorities alone.”<sup>176</sup> This quote actively assigns blame and action to the Munich authorities for their part in the mistreatment of refugees. Amy Lonetree states that decolonized museums and spaces will use the active voice to speak to the devastation wrought upon disadvantaged populations.<sup>177</sup> By actively engaging with its history, placing action where action occurred, and employing the active voice the Munich State Museum is standing in activist solidarity with refugee populations.

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<sup>174</sup> Donna Graves and Gail Dubrow, “Taking Intersectionality Seriously: Learning from LGBTQ Heritage Initiatives for Historic Preservation,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 41, no. 2 (2019): 293, DOI: 10.1525/tph.2019.41.2.290.

<sup>175</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

<sup>176</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

<sup>177</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 138.

### Exhibit Strength: Creating a Healing Space

Integration in exhibits such as the “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” creates a space of healing whose importance cannot be understated. In much the same way as hospitals, museums can act as centers for healing. As public historians, we serve in a similar capacity of nurses and it is our duty to help heal the ailments of society. Unlike hospitals, museums can heal individuals culturally, emotionally, intellectually, and physically. Bessel Van Der Kolk states that “We have discovered that helping victims of trauma find the words to describe what has happened to them is profoundly meaningful, but usually it is not enough. For real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed.”<sup>178</sup> Once this is done, the mind and body, which have experienced, trauma can begin to heal.

While it is important for museums to open spaces for displaced voices, it is even more important that the displaced persons are engaging actively with these exhibits. Kolk also states that it is important to be “Truly heard and seen by the people around us.”<sup>179</sup> While having people see and be with the trauma that one has experienced may not always be the solution, museums can allow for it to be one of the solutions. Jill Mackin, a scholar from Montana State University, expanded on these ideas in her talk at Montana State University’s annual Stegner Public History conference and states that colonization and healing from its effects is a burden on everyone in our society.<sup>180</sup> She continued by saying that colonialism is a burden for us all to carry and the

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<sup>178</sup> Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014), 21.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>180</sup> Jill Mackin, “Narrative of Change,” Dialogue, Strengthening the Ties That Bind: Public History in Montana, Bozeman, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

only way that we can help those affected by colonial authority is by confronting it and having it be at the forefront of discourse. In this way the healing process for displaced peoples can begin.

According to Mackin, in order for this conversation to be productive it must come from a place of love. Traditionally, historians have shunned the emotional side of their craft. In her text *The Gender of History* Bonnie Smith concurs that, it is vital that we incorporate emotion into historiography. Because history, the public, and museums are about human connection and human connection requires emotion, it stands to reason that history and historiography needs emotion. It is through the integration of emotion, love, and connection into museum practices that real healing of past wounds can begin, and a better understanding of future solutions can come to light.

#### Exhibit Strength: Effective Use of Technology

Similar to “Many Voices, One Nation”, “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” employs innovative technology to amplify refugee voices and humanize their stories. However, unlike “Many Voices, One Nation”, this exhibit takes it a step further by using the primary source material from refugees themselves. For example, one text panel states “Samir (real name withheld) came to Munich as a refugee from Iran in 2015. He recorded his impressions of the city with his smartphone camera, posing in front of famous landmarks and things that he found curious.”<sup>181</sup> Samir gave the museum his photos and videos to use in the exhibit. These personal materials provide people with a raw connection that differentiates from normal curated videos and oral histories. This relates to an argument made by Nina Simon in which she tells about a

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<sup>181</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

Turkish man who had very little contact with people from the LBGQT+ community. He visited an exhibit which showcased this history and stated “It was unbelievably exciting to find myself facing him with his body, opinions and identity. It seems he was not very different from me and especially he was not an alien.”<sup>182</sup> The voices and videos connect people to something tangible and therefore create more in-depth and long-lasting learning.

### Exhibit Weakness: Potential for “Othering” of Refugees

The integration of “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt,” while on the correct track, is far from perfect. The exhibit separates traditional and migrant history. This further reinforces traditional power dynamics and narratives of separation. It creates a distinction between both cultures. The danger is that by separating both cultures a gray area is created for the visitor to interpret the refugee history as lesser than that of the western culture. Richard Rabinowitz asserts, nothing in museums should be left to chance.<sup>183</sup> With the help of migrant and refugee collaborators, the exhibit should explicitly show the visitor the key themes and concepts. There should be little room left for misinterpretation or for a visitor to walk away with vastly different ideas than those proposed by the museum staff and community agents. As with all exhibits, Gary Edson argues that honesty and accuracy must dominate the exhibit.<sup>184</sup> By leaving room for interpretation honesty and accuracy cannot be guaranteed and therefore Edson’s goals are not accomplished. Also, through differentiation, the exhibit is enforcing traditional stereotypes and notions surrounding refugee populations.

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<sup>182</sup> Nina Simon, *Participatory Design and the Future of Museums*, ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin Filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 28.

<sup>183</sup> Richard Rabinowitz, “Eavesdropping at the Well: Interpretive Media in the *Slavery in New York* Exhibition.” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 35, no. 3 (2013): 23. DOI: 10.1525/tph.2013.35.3.8.

<sup>184</sup> Gary Edson, *Museum Ethics*, New York: Routledge, 1997, 48.

Europe, and more specifically Germany, is one of the major ports of migration in the world. There has been an increase in violence and discrimination against displaced voices. Major ports of migration create violence, which is highlighted in a Reece Jones text which states “The existence of the border [to a country] itself produces the violence that surrounds it.”<sup>185</sup> Correspondingly, museums act as an intellectual border for the broader displaced population of the world. Similar to the physical borders displaced persons must cross, when museologists and museum professionals adhere to the status quo they create intellectual borders that displaced persons must once again try to cross. An unfair and asymmetrical intellectual war is waged against the very existence of displaced persons and their stories. By not including their voices within museum spaces they must once again cross a border of violence. Refugees must fight all over again to be seen following the traumatic experience of being displaced either from a country or within a country. It should never be the task of displaced persons to once again fight for intellectual salvation.

There are multiple forms of violence which challenge displaced peoples upon arriving in a country. The first is overt physical violence, which is inflicted upon the actual bodies of displaced peoples.<sup>186</sup> The second form of violence is often less overt and harder to see. Jones states “The second form is the use of force or power – threatened or actual – that increases the chances of injury, death or deprivation.”<sup>187</sup> This is vital to understanding in museums because when museums seek to amplify the voices of displaced persons, they also help to dissuade uses of fear and threats to these people. This is seen most prevalently in Greece and its recently

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<sup>185</sup> Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (New York, NY: Verso, 2017), 5.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

elected right-wing nationalist government. The country has come under scrutiny in recent years after its treatment of displaced persons. In a recent article produced by *The Guardian*, the author highlights this new governmental policy “Since the conservative New Democracy party came to power last summer, the government has decided to push ahead with a punitive, hard-right asylum policy focused on deterring people from arriving on the Aegean islands in the first place.”<sup>188</sup>

When deterrence becomes the policy of a country, many thousands of humans lose their lives. It is an ineffective system which causes the loss of migrant lives and silences their voices long before they have a chance to reach safety and a new life.

However, as previously mentioned Greece is not the only country which has struggled with violence and discrimination against displaced persons. In Germany on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020, a gunman opened fire on two shisha bars killing nine people.<sup>189</sup> Within Germany this was, “the third far-right shooting in a year” which were racially motivated.<sup>190</sup> It should be the role of museums in countries like Germany to dissuade violence perpetrated against displaced persons through humanization. In humanizing and creating ethical and empathetic museum exhibits, steps are taken toward no longer having acts such as these dominating news reels.

The violence and discrimination perpetrated by the German people and government is not the only form of violence being employed, nor is the other form of violence exclusive to Germany. The past two decades have been marked by exponential increases in violence along border lands. Reece Jones points out the multiple ways that governments have employed more

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<sup>188</sup> Apostolis Fotiadis, Greece’s refugee plan is inhumane and doomed to fail. The EU must step in,” *The Guardian*, February 16, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/16/greece-refugee-plan-eu-detention-centres-refugees>.

<sup>189</sup> Luke Mgee, Rob Picheta, Sheena Mckenzie and Ivana Kottasova, “Germany shooting: Gunman kills 9 at Hanau shisha bars,” *CNN*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/germany-shooting-dle-intl/index.html>.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

active and passive military practices along borders. However, Jones' text is not the only example of this increase in violence. Border violence and discrimination against displaced persons dominate bookshelves, politics, and many other realms of society. The physical violence that is increasing along these borders is not the only violence that is occurring. This is the intellectual warfare which is being waged against displaced persons. The practices of institutions such as museums and their lack of coverage or passive presentation of displaced persons history, shapes the minds of those in power who visit these institutions. This, in turn, leads to policies of violence being enacted along the border lands of countries such as the United States or Germany. By perpetuating intellectual violence, museums are helping to bolster colonial western authority and creating conditions for violence that are seen at border lands.

In addition to intellectual violence that stems from separating western and "other" cultures, "Migration Bewegt Die Stadt" presents very different artifacts for each population. As the visitor walks the halls, they are met with refugee artifacts that look much less "refined" than their European counterparts. The exhibit highlights street art, tattered blankets, and objects that have travelled with refugees. For the western Euro-centric portion of the exhibit, there is a highlighting of famous works of art, culture, literature, etc. One of the most poignant examples is a sign in graffiti style that reads "Westend," the name of a prominent refugee neighborhood, that is located directly behind an architectural rendering of a local western Christian church.<sup>191</sup> The difference between the two artifacts is jarring. One a stylized piece of graffiti, the other an institution in which religion is practiced. There could not be a larger difference between the two artifacts. While it is important to highlight the differences in lived experience, there is a danger

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<sup>191</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

in presenting this vast of a difference. While presenting different types of artifacts could elicit additional empathy, the cost of people interpreting one culture as lesser than the other is to serious of a danger in western societies. This harsh dissimilarity creates a distinction between both cultures which might emphasize that refugees are “lesser” than that of the western counterparts. In order to remedy this, further expansion of collections and stories which emphasizes either changing the refugee section or western section of the exhibit is needed. By creating a more equitable presentation of artifacts and objects the museum indicates that it has become further decolonized and created a more active space.

#### Focused Discussion: Addressing and Mitigating Othering in the Museum Context

To best understand intellectual violence lets refocus for a moment on the Museum of the Rockies located in Montana. Power does not always flow from the barrel of a gun. The power dynamics that dominate our world today are not always visible to the naked eye. They are much more nuanced and as hard to see to the untrained museology eye as a micro-organism is to a scientist without a microscope. Indeed, it is hard to distinguish these power differentials to even the most trained of museum curators. They often manifest themselves in ways that do not seem, upon the surface, to be a power differential. For example, the Native American hall of the Museum of the Rockies contains the history of all the federally recognized nations of Native Americans in Montana. It presents their traditional lifeways but does not exclusively place native history in the past. Rather, it presents some modern history of the Native nations of Montana and how they are living to this day. Upon, closer look the hall exhibits many power differentials. The hall is both physically and intellectually separate from the Montana history hall, therefore, separating Native history from Montana history as a whole. This implies that Native Americans

history is a separate category which in turn may lead visitors to view this culture as “lesser”. Additionally, very little is mentioned about the hardships or colonial structures that affect Native populations. These same lessons and ideas can be applied to exhibits on displaced persons’ histories and voices. While some exhibits might seem to be evolving very few are fully active nor fully integrate all the components of an ethical museum exhibit. It is important for museum exhibits to give credence to these power differentials and the violence that arises from them. It is through such exhibits that one can begin to fully grasp how intellectual violence can manifest within an exhibit space.

How does this connect to amplifying displaced persons’ voices? It is a lesson which has been slow to be applied to other forms of exhibiting. Why is it that one rarely finds real people in a museum space that is not a living history exhibit? The assistance of a guide or a worker can help beyond measure with comfort and learning in a museum space. One of the best examples of this in a major museum is the Jewish Museum of Munich. Not only does this museum tell a wonderfully cohesive story of displacement and a history which celebrates triumphs and tells the hard truths, it also has one of the most involved staffs that I have encountered in museums. Before entering each space, the visitor is greeted by a worker who explains to the visitor the layout of the exhibit and how to navigate the space for the most cohesive experience. Following this, the worker then helps the visitor to physically engage with the exhibits. It is an innovative museum with many interactives which do a wonderful job of explaining content without resembling a children’s museum. Because it is so interactive, it is easy to become lost or confused. However, with the help of the workers a visitor is able to navigate the museum with ease. Additionally, the space employs the Jewish voices who have been affected by the past anti-

Semite history of Munich. This is joined with the interactives of the exhibit spaces. But once again, because there is so much help for the visitor throughout the museum, it is easy to navigate and view.

### Case Study Three: Discussion and Conclusions

Though “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” places refugee voices as the protagonist, it is vital that the exhibit and curatorial staff do not become complacent. According to Bryony Onciul “It is important to recognize that community controlled museums are not necessarily a conclusion, but the beginning of new relations with their own challenges and dynamics that will require communities and any museum-like forms to continue to engage and deal with the asymmetries of power relations.”<sup>192</sup> Becoming complacent puts the museum at risk of perpetuating colonial power structures. It risks further silencing the voices of disadvantaged populations. Amy Lonetree expands upon this argument stating “Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection, and rejection of victimage. Decolonization is about empowerment – a belief that situations can be transformed.”<sup>193</sup> Michael Frisch warns “New information modalities and capacities are not inherently solutions and may indeed be part of a continuing problem.”<sup>194</sup> Repackaging the same solutions or using new ideas is not always going to be successful; there are going to be hiccups in trying new things. There will never be just one concrete solution to the problem of ethically presenting refugee voices. Frisch equates it to designing and rolling out the

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<sup>192</sup> Bryony, Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 81.

<sup>193</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>194</sup> Michael Frisch, “From a Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back”, ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin Filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 134.

next big app; the process will take a lot of work with many failures.<sup>195</sup> However, the largest failure is not trying. It may be challenging to find the solution, and that same solution might not work for all museums. The true danger is not in trying new things or solutions; the true danger is knowing this reality and choosing to give up. In doing so, one is doing more harm to refugees than one could ever do in trying to help amplify voices. Curators must learn from the mistakes that they make along the way and adapt.

“Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” is an exhibit which, while being far from perfect, is a correct step in the direction of creating an active space. Taking such steps signals to disadvantaged populations that a museum is standing in solidarity with them. It also indicates that a museum is trying to be a good ally. Museums that are putting in the work and the time to become activists in solidarity by supporting refugees and other disadvantaged populations. The exhibit’s space and the whole of the museum does not shy away from telling the hard truths of colonization, oppression, and power structures. An example of this comes from a sign titled “How Many Stories Do We Have In Us?” which states “The racist description of ‘Africans’ as ‘savages,’ was, in the past, motivated by the arrogance of colonial rule. Yet, even today, enlightened people sometimes forget that their own views are not free of prejudice, oversimplification, and distortion.”<sup>196</sup> Quotes such as these show that the exhibit is willing to tackle past injustices and their continuation into modern society. However, the exhibit “others” the voices of migrants and displaced persons. A better exhibit would seek to distinguish the voices of displaced persons while still integrating their stories into the museum. Overall this

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<sup>195</sup> Michael Frisch, “From a Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back”, ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin Filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 134.

<sup>196</sup> Wall text, *Migration Bewegt Die Stadt*, Munich Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany.

exhibition is a step in the deconstruction of colonial authority, and with small tweaks has the potential to become a truly great exhibit.

## CONCLUSION

## THE POWER OF ACTIVISM IN MUSEUMS

I would like to return the reader to the story of my family, the Moussallis. What I did not discuss was the aftereffects following their migration. There were many sleepless nights for our family hoping that our cousins, aunts, and uncles would be safe in their journey to the United States. Once they had finally made it to the United States, our family was one of the lucky families. We had connections because of our privilege, and we were able to help our family to find housing, to get jobs, to continue their paths of education and after a few years my family's story returned to normalcy. They are still treated like outsiders even by parts of our own family. They are often told to go home or back from where they came from. They have been taunted, called all manner of racial slurs, and dehumanized. So, while their lives have returned to normalcy on the surface, they still face many struggles which I will never experience as a non-displaced person. I often think of what would have happened to my cousins, aunts, and uncles had our family not come from a privileged background. What tragedies would have befallen them? Would they have made it to the shores of another country? Or would they have perished in Syria?

For much of the world's displaced populations these are not hypothetical questions to be considered, but harsh realities to which there is little hope of escape. Displaced persons throughout the world face inequitable power distributions which dehumanize their populations. Throughout the world displaced persons flee or migrate from countries for reasons, which are often out of their control. They flee to seek a new and better life for themselves going to

countries like the United States or the EU. However, there is a deep irony for displaced persons. Reece Jones states “The irony is that migrants from these disorderly artificial states, which are the remnants of European colonialism, are denied the right to move to Europe to escape the artificial boundaries that Europe left behind.”<sup>197</sup> Though Jones is talking about Europe in this example the same irony applies to the United States and its colonial authority which is felt by many nations throughout the world. Undemocratic power distributions then play themselves out in museum spaces leading to further dehumanization and oppression of displaced populations. Michelle Rolph Trouillot speaks to how inequitable power distribution presents itself in the world of history “The presences and absences embodied in sources (artifacts and bodies that turn an even into fact) or archives (facts collected, thematized, and processed as documents and monuments) are neither neutral or natural.”<sup>198</sup> Because museums and history itself is unbalanced in the representation of marginalized voices museums must take an active role in remedying this imbalance.

Many displaced persons don't have family which live abroad that they can seek refuge with. Rather, theirs is a journey of tragedy and hardship. Alexander Betts gives life to this idea best when he states “A tragedy is a sequence of events that unfold inexorably to a terrible end, but for which there is some ‘if only’ that, had decisions been different, would have averted it.”<sup>199</sup> This is the sad reality of the state of the global refugee crisis. But not all tragedies are inevitable. Betts continues after his discuss with a poignant idea, “It is time to remake history.”<sup>200</sup> It is time

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<sup>197</sup> Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (New York, NY: Verso, 2017), 118.

<sup>198</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 48.

<sup>199</sup> Alexander Betts and Paul Collier, *Refuge: Rethinking Refugee Policy in a Changing World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 229.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

for museums to stop taking a passive stance in our world. Change must occur and it must occur now. Through the ethical presentation and amplification of refugee and displaced persons stories and voices museum spaces become active institutions and a space of civic engagement and learning for the public.

### Final Reflections on the Case Studies

The exhibit “Many Voices, One Nation” teaches audiences that the incorporation of a plurality of voices is vital to changing a nation's identity and narrative. By creating an exhibit that centers on diversity “Many Voices, One Nation” alters stereotypes and humanizes refugee populations. Its incorporation of a plurality of voices, and its innovative use of technology signal that the Smithsonian has created the foundations of decolonization. Chapter two emphasized the importance of changing narratives and creating equitable spaces. However, the exhibit itself failed to tell the hard truths of colonization and is a top-down driven exhibit. When these two factors are combined with the disorganization of the exhibit, it is clear that “Many Voices, One Nation” failed to live up to its full potential. Though there are some shortcomings to “Many Voices, One Nation”, it has set the stage for more exhibits centered on refugees in the United States and has begun the crucial dialogue surrounding these populations and the issues they face.

It is the responsibility of The Smithsonian and other United States museums to aid the thousands of American activists seeking to demolish inequity through education and protest. American institutions cannot sit on the sideline of politics and remain inactive. Institutions like museums must seek out refugee voices and tell the hard truths of violent borders and their impacts. Museums must take an active role in the solidarity and education of the public about the plight of displaced persons and, alongside other actors, actively work toward a solution. If

museums remain passive, they are by default taking a political stance that supports inequality and colonialism. The hallmark of these institutions must be the creation of active spaces.

“Who Is A Refugee?” emphasized the ideas of solidarity, activism, and community driven narratives. It showed that these ideals do not require vast amounts of funding or massive buildings. Rather, it is through creativity, sensitivity, and commitment that these goals are accomplished. It shows the early foundations of an ethical space centered on refugee voices. Through ideas of accompaniment and solidarity “Who Is A Refugee?” created an exhibit driven by displaced voices. For all its strengths in the realm of representation and centering around displaced voices, it lacked in a few key areas. The project was a small undertaking and lacked in preparation time, funding, and in-depth experience in decolonization of museum spaces. Although the exhibit was far from perfect, it gave audiences a glimpse into the future of museums centered on refugees.

“Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” shows readers that through commitment to displaced populations along with integration of histories, a museum can create ethical museum spaces centered on refugee populations. By employing innovative technology to connect visitors to these populations the Munich Stadtmuseum humanizes refugees for its citizens. The integration of refugee and western histories, while flawed, makes for a unique exhibit. It places refugees and their voices front and center. This in turn makes it impossible for visitors to ignore. By creating an exhibit which makes it impossible to ignore refugees and their stories, “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” signals its commitment to changing society for the better. Using active voice and intersectional practices this exhibit declares its choice to become an active space that isn’t afraid of taking a stance on political issues. Even though the exhibit has small flaws, it is an early

example of ethically building a decolonized exhibit, which heals past historic traumas, that should be followed by museums globally.

Each of these case studies show different levels of engagement with refugee populations and their stories. The chapters highlighted the importance of active museums in the fight for equality for refugees. Through examples of both major and minor institutions standing in solidarity with refugees. Through ethical and empathetic exhibit construction museums such as these examples emerge as frontline activist institutions. In turn, museums co-create spaces of healing and learning which benefit not only museums but the world itself. Although each example gave insight into the foundation of this engagement, there is still much work to be done. Museums and their staffs must “buy” into new museology and shared authority.

#### A Call to Activism and Advocacy in Museum Spaces

Shifting focus from the case studies, what are the takeaways for an activist museum worker? The first lesson to be divined is that changing a field of study through exhibits such as “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” or “Who Is A Refugee” is a massive undertaking. Change of this magnitude is not the work of a sole individual. It requires the work of an entire nation and for many to jump on board. As Amy Lonetree states “Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection, and rejection of victimization. Decolonization is about empowerment – a belief that situations can be transformed.”<sup>201</sup> The pessimistic argument that no matter what one tries nothing will change can be brought to bear. Indeed, how could one not lose hope on occasion. The very structures that oppress refugee populations and prevent their voices from being integrated into

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<sup>201</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 9.

museum spaces are so engrained in our societal structure that it feels unnatural to rebel against it. However, rebellion is needed, because these structures are anything but natural.

Breaking from what feels normal or natural in a field is never a comfortable experience. It requires scholars to place themselves in potentially uncomfortable situations. I was inspired early on in my collegiate career by Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy* and advocate for reformatory justice. He asserts that there are four principles one must follow in order to incite real change in our world. The four principles are, number one, “We have become approximate with the problems we care about.”<sup>202</sup> This means that for one to change anything one must first become close to the issue that one cares about because inciting change from a distance does not work. Number two, “We have to change the narrative.”<sup>203</sup> In his text he is talking about changing the overall attitude of the U.S. population. By extension he is then talking about displaced persons and museums. Number three, and potentially the most important principle, “We have to remain hopeful.”<sup>204</sup> The principle of hope seems easy: keep persisting, and change will occur. However, it is not this simple. Ethical museum exhibits will be rejected by boards or administrators and unethical museum exhibits will continue to be presented to the public. It is imperative that activists continue to fight. We must remain hopeful that no matter the pace, change will occur. The last principle that Stevenson brings up in his speech is, “Sometimes we have to do things that make us uncomfortable.”<sup>205</sup> For the museum professional this often means engaging with refugee populations on their terms, letting them take leadership on a project, or

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<sup>202</sup> Bryan Stevenson, “Convocation” (Montana State University Fall Convocation, Montana State University, April 24, 2017).

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

travelling to a place that one never thought one would and helping a population to amplify its voice. Regardless of what each of these principles looks like in one's life and work, it is vital to understand and accept that change is not comfortable.

Change requires adhering to and applying new museology to museums, centered on the idea of institutions becoming socially active spaces. New museology hinges on the creation of healing spaces, cross-cultural connections, and speaking the hard truths of colonization. It also dictates that the histories of disadvantaged populations must be the center of exhibits like those used as examples in this thesis. In addition to these ideas', new museology decrees that as museums continue to evolve that they relinquish ever increasing power to disadvantaged populations. The end goal should be for these populations and their stories not to fully replace western staff, but to have equal representation in museums. This means not only equality in the distribution of stories, but also equality in the distribution of staff and workers. By leading by example and becoming frontline advocates for change, museums help to incite change within society.

New shared authority, which is equally important, emphasizes that much like oral history museum work is "long haul" work, and because refugee history is traumatic it is important to understand the flexibility of memory and history. The time for disempowerment and colonialism are long past finished. Two important words should define our field and our practice: ethical engagement and activism. Through speaking openly and honestly about colonial authority and engaging with displaced populations, museums can co-create spaces of healing and learning. When we create new ethical, active and empathetic museum exhibits, we create fuller and richer sites of learning which benefit everyone.

It is through actions such as the employment of active voice, speaking the hard truths of colonization, creation of spaces of healing, etc. that museum can begin down a new path.

Richard Sandell and Robert Janes concur in their statement that “Museums, as social institutions, have the opportunity and the obligation to question the way in which society is manipulated and governed. Activism also means resistance – the critical questioning and re-imagining of the status quo.”<sup>206</sup> Breaking from the status quo of museums requires activism and change.

Maura Reilly, an arts writer and curatorial activist, states “Mainstream curators propagating discriminatory practices must be held accountable, and curatorial misconduct criticized, to the point where it becomes unacceptable.”<sup>207</sup> No change can occur without activism and conversely no activism can occur without curators being willing to change and shift from the old norms of museum practice to the new norms of today. Activism and the dissolution of discriminatory practices, which are often tied to traditional museum practices, must be done away with in order to instigate change. With any new idea or alteration to the status quo there is always a push back. However, “As the news each day reminds us, these are not always easy or comfortable conversations. But they will breathe new life into our museums.”<sup>208</sup>

Our world stands on a precipice. For one of the first times in human history our known existence in our world is not guaranteed. Nowhere is this more undeniable than the refugee crisis. According to most recent estimates, there have been roughly 70 million people displaced

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<sup>206</sup> Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived.” ed. Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, eds., *Museum Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 6.

<sup>207</sup> Maura Reilly, “What is Curatorial Activism,” ARTnews, AAM, November 7, 2017, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/what-is-curatorial-activism-9271/>.

<sup>208</sup> Kathleen Mclean, “Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?” ed. Bill Adair and Benjamin Filene, eds., *Letting Go?* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 79.

in recent years.<sup>209</sup> This number is not declining, nor is it simply going to go away if we ignore it. Human beings are being displaced by all manner of issues including war, politics, environmental disaster, and other issues. According to the UNHCR, as you read this upwards of 37,000 people will be displaced today.<sup>210</sup> This number is not inconsequential; every hour roughly twenty-five people are forcibly displaced. This does not even account for the millions of others who are not recognized or reported as displaced. It is time for western museums to change, to become active spaces of healing, learning, deconstruction of power, deconstruction of colonial power, and ethically engage with displaced voices.

Lonetree points to the fact that museums must become more active in order to help heal old wounds. For Lonetree it is only through directly dealing with colonialism and its effects that one can have a museum that ethically presents disadvantaged voices. In the case of *Curating the Future* the authors point to the fact that it is through actively presenting and humanizing subjects that creates ethical museum exhibits. In each case, the authors are calling upon public historians, museums, and others involved in these fields to take a stance. They are calling on museums to present hard information in a way that evokes emotion in audiences. Viet Than Nguyen expands upon this idea in his discussion on memory he states, “Struggles for memory are thus inextricable from other struggles for voice, control, power, self-determination, and the meanings of the dead.”<sup>211</sup> Museums are rooted in memory and therefore are held to this analysis. Without being active or taking an activist stance, museums miss an opportunity to help right these wrongs of power in our history by confronting the past wrongs of museums. It is the duty of the museum

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<sup>209</sup> “Refugee Crisis in Europe,” *UNHCR*. Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/refugee-crisis-in-europe/>.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen *Nothing Ever Dies* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 108.

to come to terms with its own history as a colonial authority. In doing so we create a new space for more voices to be heard. Lonetree, Nguyen, and many others are calling for change and museum workers must head that call. It is because of this that activism must become a museum priority and museums throughout the world must take active actions not passive actions. In this way museums can be forerunners in change, rather than houses for relics of the past.

### Museums in a Larger Context of Societal Healing

Taking an active role and encouraging change in museums is only first step. One might be asking, practically, how do museums fit into this complex puzzle of solving the injustices that face displaced persons? The Glenbow museum is known for its commitment to decolonization and creation of equitable exhibits. It is museum which has put in the long-haul work of decolonization. The director Robert Janes states, “museums exist to communicate and in the process provide answers to the question... What does it mean to be a human being?”<sup>212</sup> Museums are places where people of all backgrounds can come together and answer the eternal question of what it means to be human and to live together in a society. By presenting ethical and active museum exhibits, which are directed by the voices of displaced peoples, they can begin to heal the traumas of displaced persons throughout the world. This is not to say that the only solution is a museum exhibit. In fact, this is just one of the many steps which must occur to heal the traumas that have been caused by the western colonial movement restrictions of modern countries. According to displaced experts there are many solutions that need to be implemented

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<sup>212</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 210.

which range from a global minimum wage to the creation of new open border policies through governmental intervention.

Regardless of the solution, humanization and ethical treatment are core principles which drive these solutions. This is where museums facilitate results. Through examples such as “Migration Bewegt Die Stadt” and “Who Is A Refugee” museums both big and small are helping to humanize displaced populations. The largest strength of each of these exhibits is the fact that displaced voices are the driving forces behind each exhibit. Had either relied solely on curatorial authority and not shared, or completely relinquished, control of the narrative to displaced persons neither exhibit would have been effective. Each exhibit gave space for displaced voices as the driving force and attempted to blend together the hard truths of power along with celebrating the resiliency of these voices. These examples serve as a goal to strive towards, and eventually surpass. By taking the lessons that each case study teaches us and applying them to our own museums we can begin to allow ethical and empathetic treatment of displaced populations to drive our core principles.

It is my hope that through museums embracing empathetic, ethical, and active museum construction, with the voices of displaced persons driving these exhibits, they can begin to tear down the colonial structures of our society. In doing so they help facilitate civic engagement and learning for the public. This in turn humanizes displaced populations and can lead to meaningful change. Museum spaces must change because not every displaced family is as lucky as mine. I desire to live in a world where my aunts, uncles, and cousins have no fear and are treated as equals and seen in the same light that I am. Above all else I crave to live in a world free from hate, discrimination, racism, and oppression. I also hope the world can come to know these

stories. While museums might not directly lead to solutions for all of these issues, they can help. To harken back to the words of Bryan Stevenson, “We have to remain hopeful.”<sup>213</sup> So I will continue to hope and continue to fight for change in these spaces through implementing all the ideas discussed throughout this thesis. The time for fear is done and the time for hesitation is no more. Museums must become activist in their communities and show how to change. The impact that a museum can have on a community is direct. It can humanize people, it can bridge gaps, and it creates change.

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<sup>213</sup> Bryan Stevenson, “Convocation” (Montana State University Fall Convocation, Montana State University, April 24, 2017).

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