Holding On, Letting Go: Escaping the Contemporary Museum

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Content note: This piece discusses ableism, anti-Blackness, colonialism, enslavement, eugenics, extinction, gendered violence, genocide (human and nonhuman), racism, and other forms of structural violence.

Contemporary museums combine many of the iconic organizational structures and logics of contemporary Euro-descendent, colonial-capitalist societies – from the university to the hospital, the art gallery to the archive, the lab to the prison, the mall to the morgue. These spaces are experienced in unique ways by diverse mindbodies[1] – the singular constellations of physical, somatic, sensory, and neurological features that compose sentient experience (human and nonhuman). For mindbodies that have experienced violence within one or more of these institutions and structures, moving through a museum evokes visceral feelings. For instance, the experience may be jarring, confusing, (re-)traumatizing, surprising, cathartic, nostalgic, melancholy, painful, or many of these things at once, as the museum recombines these spaces and logics, moving mindbodies through them. Attending to how museums are experienced by multiple mindbodies, human and nonhuman, can provide important insights to museums and cultural workers striving to make museums into sites of inclusion, critique, and transformation.

Building on these themes, the following text is an abridged version of an immersive story originally presented (with accompanying artwork and animations) at the *TAKING CARE Conference* in November 2022. It imagines a diverse group of strangers waiting to visit a new exhibit on *extinction* at a museum. Once inside, the visitors are drawn through a series of seemingly disparate rooms by an unusual guide: a museum-being who seems to be attempting an escape. This being is indeterminate and appears to change forms: it might be a flying fox (fruit bat), an *uma-t-simagere* (see below), an artificial intelligence, a piece of art, an educational tool, or something else entirely. As the visitors try to work out what the being wants or needs, they

1 Clare 2017.

must also make sense of exhibits that expose them to the multiple forms of structural violence that shape contemporary conditions of ecological violence, including racism, ableism, eugenics, and genocide. Their dialogue is not academic argument, but rather a set of frictions that reflect the deeply contested, tense but also lively ethical space of museums.

It is important to note that one of the possible manifestations of the museum-being, the *uma-t-simagere* (see photo and details below) belongs to the Mentawai peoples of Siberut, Indonesia. I do not have a personal relationship either with this being or its community of origin; as such, writing about it is inherently shaped by structures of colonial power and privilege. I want to express respect for this being, its community, and the labour of continuity they carry out, alongside the other marginalized and violenced communities (human and non-human) mentioned here.

Fig. 1: Uma-t-simagere: Sakkudei, Siberut, Sumatra, 1900–1950. Collection Nationaal Museum Van Wereldculturen, Coll.nr. 7086–8.

Holding on/letting go: fleeing the contemporary museum

We've been waiting for almost an hour to get into the exhibit. As the doors finally swing open, we jostle to read the text on the entry wall. But no sooner have we begun than we sense a disturbance of the quiet air.

First we hear the flapping: the rich, thick, almost wet sound of wings. Then we sense a blur of brown, a breeze brushing our faces, a glitchy tickle of sound in our ears. Our eyes strain to follow the jittery flight of what looks what looks like a tiny winged bear. Those of us who are from, or have visited, Southeast Asia or Australia have met creatures like this before. They are the eyes glinting in the thickness of night, the staccato chatter that fills the fruit trees, the flow of soft bodies that re-trace the rivers at dusk.

As our eyes adjust to the dimmed light, we notice a structure in the centre of the room, from which the creature appears to have flown.

'Ah!' someone exclaims, 'I've actually seen this piece before. At the state art gallery in Sydney.'

They point to what looks like a manual clothes-dryer, which is hung not with damp underwear, but hundreds of dark-brown fibreglass bats. Its base is festooned with intricately-painted discs of their shit. Placed in that way, perfectly centred in the sparse-walled room, the late Yorta Yorta artist Lin Onus's piece[2] is unmistakably *art.* But outside, as Onus's piece reflects, the fleshy versions of these beings – kin to many human and nonhuman peoples – are depicted as 'vermin' or enemies.[3] They are slated for 'removal' by local governments, or even deliberately snared in fruit nets and barbed wire, when (mostly white) suburban homeowners complain about their sounds or the smell of their droppings. It is through these same droppings that the bats shift entire forests across the continent, re-seeding the burned earth. In doing this work, the bats battle record-setting summer temperatures – often over fifty degrees Celsius – that cause them to fall, dead, from the sky, or to suffocate en masse on tree trunks.[4]

'Did it come *from* the installation? Is it a hologram? Some kind of light projection, or animation?' someone asks.

'Hmmm', says the first speaker, 'it says here that Onus marked his bats with a kind of cross-hatching unique to the Murrungun-Djinang people. *That* creature doesn't have cross-hatchings … if you look …'

Enthusiastically, the person moves towards the flapping creature, who panics and flies off around a corner. Without pausing, we all rush to pursue it.

As we turn the corner, we slow down. The next room is almost empty: one long, white wall has an image projected across its length, the other is blank, and a ghostly oblong form floats over the far door. No one can see the creature.

The grey-scale projection on the left wall looks like a massive pyramid of driftwood or sunbleached stones, stacked at least twenty metres high. Two suited white men are perched at the top and foot. Gradually, we realize that the stack is made of

2 Onus 1991.

3 Rose 2010.

4 Daley 2020.

skulls, with ovoid holes where eyes used to nest, smooth, round foreheads, and small, curved horns.
'Oh', someone finally says, 'They're just *buffalo* skulls.'
We cluster around a small placard, and someone reads aloud.

> *In the late nineteenth century, 30–60 million buffalo ranged across the great plains of North America. By the end of the century, they were reduced to just a few herds. The nascent US government encouraged soldiers and private traders to kill the buffalo, which were a primary food source and spiritual relative to many Plains Indigenous peoples. With the construction of the railroads, tourists were encouraged to shoot buffalo from train windows for fun.*

The person reads on:

> *According to Nêhiyaw scholar Tasha Hubbard,*[5] *some hunters removed calves from their families; most of them died within weeks. They would also take advantage of buffalo gathering to mourn a dead relative to shoot entire family groups.*

'Disgusting', someone mutters, 'Americans should be ashamed.'
'It wasn't just us', someone else cuts in, 'They did the same thing in Canada.'
'At least Canada *acknowledged* its *past* with that Truth and Reconciliation Commission. So that everyone can move on …', starts the first speaker, but their voice trails off as an image lights up on the opposite wall.
At first, it seems to be the *same* image. But these skulls are shinier, and piled outside of a row of glistening condo buildings. The accompanying text explains how Chippewa artist Jay Soule/CHIPPEWAR[6] created the installation to express how contemporary life in Canada continues to rely on the *ongoing* genocide of Indigenous people and their nonhuman relations.
'It's true', someone says, 'It's not "history". Did you see the reports last year about all the remains found at residential schools? Hundreds of children. And the government is forcing pipelines right next to them – '
Someone scoffs sharply.
'Ha! Right. Good luck getting your avocado toast and TikToks without those pipelines.'
As tensions prickle, the creature, who has been silently perched on the ghostly object hanging above the lintel, suddenly flaps and takes flight towards a dark corridor. Everyone rushes to follow.
Not quite everyone. Just as you reach the door, you see someone kneeling on the ground. At first you think they've fallen over.
'Are you ok?' you ask.

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5 Hubbard 2014.
6 Soule 2021.

The person nods. They've knelt directly beneath the white object hung over the exit, and are carefully unwrapping a small fabric bag. You realize that the object is an actual buffalo skull, the bone glowing like a new moon in the thin light. It is unmarked, like the anonymized animal skulls you've seen used as décor in dozens of shops and cafes since 2007.

'These are my ancestors', the person says quietly, 'They *are* "*real*". They're targets of the genocide, too. But they're coming back.'[7]

You nod, and the person turns away from you, speaking long, soft words you've never heard. They continue to vocalize in a low, melodic hum, and, behind their voice, you think you can hear the soft, burp-like grunts of ungulates. You sense that it's time to leave.

When you enter the next room, you sense a change in the mood, to something like fear, or maybe outrage. Everyone else is clustered around a small glass box in the centre of the room, which holds another skull. But this one is human. And on the wall are a series of photos of other skulls, arrayed in neat boxes.

'This is outrageous', one person says, holding a child tightly to their side, 'It's NOT appropriate for children. I'm going to complain.'

'Oh really?' someone else says, 'You think it's ok for your child to look at mummies and burial objects, but the realities of racism are "too much"? Too close to home?'

The voices are cut off by a short recording, piped in from a speaker. It reassures us that the skull in the centre of the box is a plaster cast.

'I'll bet they have the real ones down in the basement. Pull them out for Halloween!', interjects the grumbler.

Both the alleged avocado-eater and the parent round on the speaker.

'Are you serious with this shit – ', says the former, reddening.

' – have some respect!' says the other, at the same time, 'and you, watch *your* language!'

'Jesus!' barks the grumbler, 'You can't say anything any more … '.

The recording explains that the remains represented in the exhibit were held by the Penn museum in Philadelphia for over a century. The museum issued a public apology in 2021 for collecting and holding over 1300 crania.[8] Most of the remains were from enslaved Black people from Cuba, along with several Black Philadelphians, collected by nineteenth century curator and doctor Samuel George as part of his quest to prove the racial superiority of white people. Amongst them were the remains of children killed in the police bombing of a Black residential neighbourhood in 1985. After the public apology, the museum arranged for the remains of the Philadelphians to be interred in a predominantly Black cemetery in the city. It is still negotiating to repatriate the other remains to Cuba.

7 See Hubbard 2014.

8 Tumin 2022.

'We have the same problem in Europe', someone remarks, 'It's really hard to return objects, and even harder to move *bodies* across borders.'

'*What would you do*?' the voice recording interrupts, '*what should we do with the Ancestral remains we hold here? We invite you to write your answers on the cards provided.*'

As some of us start to pick up cards and pens, we suddenly remember the creature.

'Where did it go?' someone asks.

'I think it's gone through that door.' someone else suggests, and we all start moving through the narrow entry.

We stop, confused. We seem to have stumbled not into a museum display, but rather some sort of storage facility full of metal cabinets stacked with plastic boxes.

I know exactly where we are. I can tell from the thin blocks of matter, like sliced cauliflower, arrayed neatly in plastic tubs. This is a brain bank. I quietly explain this, and watch everyone's face blanch.

'What … they're *actual, human* brains? That's *disgusting* … ', but their voice sounds more scandalized than upset.

'No, it's not "disgusting"', says a firm voice, 'It's *science*. They're trying to find *cures* for things like Autism and Down's Syndrome. It's really important work.'

'It's true', someone agrees, 'There's more of it now than ever, and we can't have more pressure on social infrastructure. Or get less resilient. Especially after COVID, and with climate change … '

'Yeah', says the avocado-eater, 'I heard a podcast on how these conditions are threatening the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. They cost billions of dollars a year.'

I sense the bodies around me relaxing. But every cell of my body seems to hammer into the next. I want to explain that our difference is not 'disease', and that these brains may have been '*donated*' by people who were not deemed capable of giving or withholding consent, who spent whole lives with their natural movements, sounds, cultures, and histories punished.

I want to tell you that those 'billions of dollars' – raised by states, charities, private donors, and venture capitalists – are not 'for us'. On the contrary, they fund research whose aim is to eradicate us genetically and assimilate us culturally, all in the name of protecting 'humanity' from potential 'defects'. They're backed up by systems of involuntary sterilization by racialized police violence,[9] medical institutionalization, incarceration, plus impunity – and sympathy – for our many murderers.[10]

I *want* to say all of this, even though I'm terrified of your responses. Instead, my blood fills with bright light, and my limbs and tongue stop responding to commands

9 Half of the people killed by police are disabled, and fifty per cent of Black disabled people have been arrested by police at least once. <https://namiillinois.org/half-people-killed-police-disability-report/>.

10 See, for instance, <https://disability-memorial.org>.

from my brain. Language leaves me. I curl up in the corner, my arms moving gently, hoping that no one will notice, or worse yet, call security.

The creature, who's been hanging, camouflaged, from a metal beam, seems to notice my motions and mirror them with its own wingbeats.

'There it is!' someone shouts, noticing the creature, and they all shift towards it. Suddenly cornered, the creature grips a niche on the wall, flapping frantically.

'Wait! What's the plan here?' someone says, 'Are we trying to catch it?'

'Don't touch it! Those things are full of disease. You'll be infected and become a super-spreader.'

'That's ridiculous! Flying foxes don't carry COVID.'

'Well, I don't want *my* kids exposed to whatever the next pandemic is …'

'But it's not a *real* bat!' someone else says, holding up a phone, 'I think it's one of these – an *uma-t-sigere*. There's one in the museum's collection. It comes from a community in Sumatra. It's a kind of toy, for the spirits of people and animals, that hangs in the beams of communal houses. It keeps the people safe – '

'Come on, it's got to be some kind of AI. It responds in real-time when we move', someone else argues.

'No', someone says, 'it's way too lifelike for that. Look at how it's breathing – '

'Yeah it's breathing like that because it's *terrified*. We need to let it out.'

'Absolutely not!' says the person with the phone, 'There are rules – '

'But come on. It should be hanging in a communal house in Sumatra. Not in a museum – '

'Maybe', the first voice insists, 'but there are *international* laws and agreements. You can't just "give something back". That's *theft*. For one thing, it has to be arranged between two recognized states.'

'Oh yeah, and states have such a *great* track record of giving things back to Indigenous communities. I say we let it out.'

'No, you can't! It'll be destroyed! It's probably really fragile.'

'Ha! It's not the only one …'

'Yes, but it's *supposed* to biodegrade and go back to the earth. That's the whole point. Look, it says here …'

'Yeah, but not *here*. In *Sumatra*. It'll never make it back there.'

'None of you know what you're talking about. It's an *actual* bat. That means it's wildlife, so you can't keep it for more than a few hours. You could get a huge fine, or even go to prison …'

Suddenly, one person sprints towards the wall, throwing open a door beneath an exit sign, setting off an alarm. Crying out, everyone else rushes to the door just in time to see the creature gliding over the crest of a rolling forest. The landscape is lush, with tangles of underbrush and dense with trees from both hemispheres. A barely tangible fence of barbed wire runs along the perimeter.

'Now they'll never get it back!' someone bemoans, and the voices start again.

'Who won't? The museum? Or the community?'
'It's an invasive species! It will destroy the ecosystem!'
One person starts to move in pursuit of the creature, but someone else puts out a hand to stop them.
'You can't go in there', they warn.
'Why?' the first person says, anxious, 'Look at the sign. It says it's a *nature reserve*.'
'A *private* nature reserve', corrects the scientist, 'this whole area is owned by some tech billionaire who's into rewilding. He's going to fill it with wolves, maybe some Jurassic Park-type shit.'
'Can he do that?' someone asks.
'Yeah, a lot of rich people are doing it. They buy up as much damaged land as they can, and turn it into reserves or whatever else they want – '
'But we can't go in?'
'Not unless you want to be arrested, or shot. Or *eaten*.'
No one, it turns out, wants to be shot or arrested. Or eaten.
Instead, everyone stands in silence, watching. The creature's wingbeats are now too faint to detect. It is gone, into its own uncertain future.
We turn, slowly, and re-enter the museum.

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