

## 1 Introduction

In the ashes of the British fire that burned his cousins to the ground, what did Uncas see?

– Madeline Sayet, *Mohegan*, 2019i

On 17 June 2019, Mohegan playwright, actor and theatrical director Madeline Sayet gave a performance as part of the biennial Origins Festival at the Globe Theatre in London. Sayet was the first Native American playwright to stage a play at the theatre, and in the intimate mock-Tudor surroundings of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, she performed a self-penned, one-woman, one-act play named *Where We Belong*. Everything about the performance was designed to conspicuously situate Sayet as a Native woman operating within this quintessentially British space; her costume for example, was designed for the show by Cherokee-Navajo designer Asa Benally.

Sayet is a Shakespearean performer and director of considerable experience, who had come to England to study for a PhD in Shakespearean theatre. In Britain however she grappled with the complexities of being an Indigenous woman and Shakespeare scholar in a country which, it seems, finds it impossible to accept the combination of these two parts of her identity. She found herself continually coerced to study ‘the primitive’, ‘the Native’ or ‘Caliban’, forcing upon her a performative Indigeneity at odds with her intention, experience and knowledge of the subject. Lonely, and in search of solace and common experience, Sayet was driven to find traces of Native American presence in Britain, such as at the recently installed grave-marker of her Mohegan ancestor Mahomet Weyonomon at Southwark Cathedral.<sup>1</sup> It is in this vein that the play recounts a visit she made to the North American Gallery at the British Museum, where she was given a tour by an academic.

In the play, this experience is dramatically recreated: the academic is disdainful, sneering at the dead migratory birds on the glass roof of the Great Court and dismissive of repatriation claims from Indigenous Australians. In the gallery itself, Sayet stands in shock, ‘looking at a mash of mislabelled indigenous objects, like varying nations crowded into a rail car – a continent facing genocide over hundreds and hundreds of years – wide spanses of geography thrown together in cases without specific acknowledgement’ (Sayet, 2019:30).

<sup>1</sup> Mahomet Weyonomon was a sachem of the Mohegan people who travelled to London in 1735 to appeal to King George II against the seizure of Mohegan lands in Connecticut by English settlers. The appeal was referred to the Lords Commissioners, but Weyonomon died from smallpox before a decision was reached. He was buried in the grounds of Southwark Cathedral in an unmarked grave. In 2006, a memorial made of Connecticut granite was erected in the churchyard to commemorate Weyonomon, unveiled by Queen Elizabeth II and Mohegan tribal chairman Bruce Two Dogs Bozsmun.

On the question of human remains, of ancestors taken and repackaged as curiosities for European audiences, the academic is entirely transactional; ‘No’ he says, ‘if we start giving back human remains, well they don’t know where that would lead. They might have to give other things back.’ Ultimately Sayet can only note with regret that she is ‘sorry I have nothing to offer the spirits crowding the building, mashed up against friends, enemies, and strangers who don’t understand them. I am scared to close my eyes and listen to the howling and pain around me.’ Finally, she recounts ‘I wander away into an exhibit on clocks and stare at it for a while – to cleanse my body of all the stolen stories, and objects of violence in this place. I want to go home’ (Sayet, 2019:33). Far from finding solace in the museum, Sayet found pain.

The play moves on, Sayet telling of ending her PhD study early and returning home, where instead of criticism for not completing her course she finds acceptance and celebration at her travels and experiences in the footsteps of Mahomet Weyonomon. It was a powerful performance, which directly addressed the devastating legacies of colonialism among the Native peoples of the East Coast of North America. Throughout, she engages specifically with the chronic inability of British institutions, particularly those of education and knowledge, to meaningfully engage in a systematic way with those legacies – the academic at the British Museum for example is entirely insensitive to the pain his tour has caused, finishing the meeting with a ghost story, to which Sayet simply replies, ‘You don’t say . . .’

The importance of this kind of intervention into the British theatrical scene, the precedent it sets and the critical nature of the issues it addresses are at the heart of addressing decolonisation, and its meaning and reality, in the UK heritage and arts sectors. I saw this performance live, seated in the front row, so close that Sayet was within touching distance. Every emotion and experience on that stage was laid bare before my eyes, and this is important to note here because the performance was in some small way part of me and I was a small part of it, because I was the academic who gave her the tour of the British Museum.<sup>2</sup>

The tour was part of a months-long series of Skype and email conversations, including on-the-record interviews about her experience living in the UK, and I had intended the tour not to be a horror show of the violence of historic and

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<sup>2</sup> Sayet has been effusive in making it clear that the academic who appears in her play is not meant to be me personally. Two months before the performance she wrote to me ‘just FYI the section based on our conversation at the British Museum is not actually a reflection on you. It is not you – it is just the info and context of that conversation as is useful to further the storytelling of the questions of the piece’ (Sayet, pers. com. 2019). After the performance she approached me directly to reassure me that the ‘academic’ of the piece was a stand-in for the neglect and disinterest, the disrespect, she felt from British institutions towards her and her people.

contemporary museum practice, but a discussion between peers of the acknowledged inadequacies of museum policy and display. During the conversation I made extensive efforts to provide content warnings about the subjects at hand, and to express my own frustrations with the failings of the institution. My excuses made, however, I must acknowledge that the words she quoted, though selectively, were mine, and that I clearly failed in my attempts to be sensitive to the impact my tour was having, and furthermore that despite years working with Indigenous communities and visitors, I had still not properly understood the degree to which the environment of the British Museum could be so directly and immediately traumatic for Sayet.

The stark reality of the trauma I had triggered for Sayet within an institution for which I worked for nearly a decade in a gallery which I helped to design, added an impetus to this research project. My intent to be supportive inadvertently became harmful through a lack of foresight and empathy, and gave a personal and powerful demonstration of the reasons why affecting and enabling a sector-wide and enduring shift in attitudes and approaches to Indigenous engagement encompassing displays, collections, visitors and relationships is so imperative. Sayet's account is particularly traumatic, and is not perhaps reflective of all Indigenous encounters in the museum spaces. Many, including some of the interviewees in this project, have positive, or at least productive, engagements with museums in Britain, in some cases lasting years.

Yet even for those less affected, the situation remains unacceptable; Professor Chris Andersen, (Michif), Dean of Indigenous Studies at the University of Alberta, acknowledged, for example, that while for him these experiences were less harmful than they were for Sayet, they were still accompanied by a feeling of 'irritation and annoyance' at stepping into a space so unrepresentative of his priorities in the display and study of material culture (Andersen, pers. com.2020).

These interactions are never easy; in the introduction to her book *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement*, Bryony Onciul writes that, 'While honourable in its intentions, the increasingly ubiquitous practice of community engagement in museums has often been under-analysed, and its difficulties and complexities understated' (2015:1). The first section in this Element, which documents the results of interviews with Native American visitors to museums in the UK, demonstrates that good intentions on the part of curators are not enough, they must be backed by actions which make a real positive impact. And these actions are becoming more urgent: there is an increasingly vocal movement in the UK towards a model of Indigenous representation in the museum sector, one which is respectful of Indigenous protocol and authority. Change is coming – it is only the terms which must be negotiated,

as well as the circumstances under which they are imposed. Art historian Alice Procter has noted to this point that ‘it feels as if we are in a moment, now, that might be a turning point. There is more public conversation around repatriation and restitution that has been building up for a while, and it seems as if it is part of a bigger, international anxiety around national identity and nationalism’ (Procter, 2020:11).

This forms part of a broader movement, expanded in detail in Section 2 and termed in this work the representation crisis. This crisis is not an academic exercise or a theoretical position, it is a direct and actively harmful theatre of colonial and post-colonial exchange in which power imbalances exacerbate and amplify past harm into present and future harm. This crisis is worsened by a second movement, termed here the expertise crisis, in which expertise with Indigenous collections is being stripped from the heritage sector by unplanned structural changes.

The research which this Element compiles and analyses was developed within the Arts and Humanities Research Council–funded project *Beyond the Spectacle*, hosted by the Universities of Kent and East Anglia. This project has sought to explore the complicated histories of Native American travellers to Britain, reaching back to the earliest visitors in the sixteenth century and continuing up to the present day. In my role in this project as a Research Associate, I took an interest in the subject of museum displays of Native American material culture, and to what extent the displays were representative or meaningful to Native Americans living in or visiting Britain. The research was conducted with Native American visitors to museums in Britain during the period of this project 2017–20 willing to collaborate with the project, and in consequence most interviewees are focused on case studies in museums in south-eastern England.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Project Goals

What Sayet’s play makes clear is that there are huge problems of representation in museums in Britain, which are caught in the midst of the two crises. Her play,

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<sup>3</sup> This publication is thus a product of *Beyond the Spectacle*, an Arts & Humanities Research Council–funded research project which examines the histories of Native North American travellers to Britain. For the purposes of this project and this Element, the terms Native North American, Native American and Indigenous indicate a person descended from the inhabitants of the continent pre European colonisation. While we have been alert to the risk of imposters, the project has not attempted to police who does and does not have the right to this identification. Since this funding was specifically entailed towards an examination of Native American histories in Britain the recommendations which follow reflect that research focus. This publication is however intended to be written in such a way that its recommendations can, with adaptation, be deployed to other collections and peoples from other continents.

and the interviews with other Native visitors which follow, make it clear that museums and museum staff must come to a better accommodation with Indigenous stakeholders, and that until they do so the heritage sector is not effectively decolonising at all, but rather all-too-often inadvertently entrenching colonialism through inaction, indifference or ignorance. This Element has two clear goals. The first is to present in context a body of evidence from Native visitors about the ways in which the UK museum sector is currently inadequately responding to Indigenous demands for better agency in museum spaces – the representation crisis – during one of the toughest funding environments museums have faced since their establishment – the expertise crisis. It also tries to offer hope by identifying and articulating solutions to this problem as identified by Native partners and interviewees.

The second goal, developed in Section 3 from the preceding discussions, is to present a simple policy road map which should help mitigate the most significant and problematic failings, those caused by a lack of training or expertise in the sector. This policy document is intended to be an adaptable and amendable guide for staff working with Indigenous collections nationwide, intended to be formally accepted as aspirational policy and integrated into basic collections management protocols moving forward. The policy is not, though, solely tailored to accommodate those small numbers of Indigenous visitors like Sayet who pass through museum spaces and engage with collections – it encourages museum staff to work directly with Indigenous communities on developing their displays, managing their collections and providing interpretation for non-Indigenous visitors.

Public education on Native American history in Britain is tiny – most visitors will know little more than they have haphazardly collected from films and television. Museums which display Indigenous American material therefore have an opportunity to educate visitors beyond these stereotypes and illustrate not only the diverse, often-tragic and always-complex histories of Native communities, but also their vibrant and joyful present; Onciul for example, noted that ‘Heritage sites and museums are important points of entry for Indigenous’ peoples’ voices into mainstream society because they have the ability to validate identities, histories, culture and societies’ (2015:8). The next section will present a thematic road map for this type of education, with a practical policy developed further in Section 3.

As with all such studies, it is no more than a snapshot in space and time, reflective of a sector undergoing deep and often uncontrolled change in a world that is likewise shifting rapidly. There are many museums in Britain which already practice some or all of the recommendations here, and inevitably some of these recommendations will be seen as obsolete in just a few years’ time. It is

my hope though that this short survey will join the growing body of work which is insisting that museums in Britain can and should do things in ways which better reflect the complexity of Indigenous experiences and histories. In this, it does not make academic debate the goal, but seeks to generate and provide working museum staff with the tools to make meaningful, if small, differences in their practices to provide at least some of those tools to begin to mitigate the errors of the past and help to promote healing, understand problematic history and mitigate the potential for harm.

## 2 Native American Visitors to Museums in the UK

Mvsoke scholar Taylor Norman noted in her 2019 study of UK museum techniques and practices towards Native American collections that without an accommodation for the harm of the past, the damage Sayet illustrates can become widespread, and she rightly calls for better Indigenous representation in the museum space as a pre-requisite for addressing this problem:

Without *state* acknowledgement of wrongdoing via harmful policies, the onus of presenting our side of the story lies with Indigenous people, namely our work to counteract centuries of lies spun to effectively enable harm. When a museum presents our cultures in a way that affirms these lies, untruths, or even partial truths, they facilitate harmful thinking which can have direct consequence in Native lives. (Norman, 2019i:15)

This acknowledgement gives cause for hope despite the crises museums face, because just as the museum is not a neutral environment, effective engagement is not a neutral or balancing act, but a positive one. There are currently dozens of decolonisation projects ongoing in UK museums and heritage organisations, and the last decades have yielded a portfolio of hundreds more. Museums and museum staff have worked and continue to work productively with Indigenous partners across the country; most recently the curators of the Arctic Exhibition at the British Museum, who collaborated with a number of Inuit partners, including the Embassy of Imagination at Cape Dorset, Nunavut (Cooper, 2020). This increased prevalence of collaborative projects has been noticed by Indigenous heritage activists, and each small project incrementally advances the broad case in small, specific ways, and if ethically managed, each can gradually start to mitigate harm and improve public education.

One such example took place in 2018, when the Horniman Museum opened its new World Galleries, replacing a twenty-year-old display of African art with a far broader permanent exhibition of objects from all over the world. I was part of the curatorial team working on this project, and part of the display we developed was an installation which was known, in the planning phase, as the

‘Totem interactive’. The curators invited Steve Smith, a Kwakwaka’wakw artist from the Northwest Coast region of North America, to produce three mask-faces of traditional figures from Kwakwaka’wakw oral history. These were then mounted on cedar pillars with buttons which, when pushed, caused stories from these oral histories to be played on a speaker.

Aimed at the Horniman’s predominately juvenile audience, these installations allow visitors to learn about Kwakwaka’wakw stories in unconventional ways. They can both touch an object – gain a sense of the texture and smell of cedar wood and thus give the display more context than mere visual presentation can allow – as well as hear a story which brings the figures on display to life. They are not static depictions solely for the aesthetic enjoyment of non-Indigenous visitors, but mask-faces collaboratively designed to educate, entertain and speak simultaneously to British audiences, Indigenous communities and beings invisible. By making connections between the oral histories of dynamic living communities and their historic material culture, showing these communities as still thriving, this project sought to educate in a way that minimises the risks of past harms turning into future harm.

These stories were formally told to the Horniman Museum by Sierra Tasi Baker, a Kwakwaka’wakw storyteller, artist and activist, who first obtained permission from the relevant family and tribal authorities to record and repeat the inherited stories for a British audience. The import of this collaboration was not lost on the participants, both within the museum and from the Native community. Tasi Baker later emphasised this in an interview for this Element:

This [interactive storytelling exhibit] is a really good precedent, for how I think museums should be showcasing our culture. The entire process itself was really respectful of protocol ... I really appreciate how that was done, very nuanced, and very well understood ... I think it’s a better way of showing our culture than a mask behind glass, and it shows that our culture is living, that it is a living culture.

I think the more that researchers start shifting towards realising that they’re helping to change the narrative, and shift the narrative, and understanding that they are agents of reconciliation I think that researchers will realise that their work opens up quite a bit more. The more they realise that research is a form of healing. I think that would be really amazing if academics could figure that one out. (Tasi Baker, 2018)

The solution that Tasi Baker suggests therefore is at once simple and complex. It amounts to no more than listening to people for whom these issues are most important and acting on their recommendations, while at the same time it demands adoption of new and holistic methods of conversation and engagement to achieve results beyond simple fixes to presentational issues, in essence an

inversion of how such displays are designed, developed and installed. If research is to be a form of healing, then it requires active participation from multiple partners and crucially, the peoples for whom the healing is most necessary. Properly managed, this idea is one which not only avoids future distress, but also begins to mitigate some of the pain of the past. It is this in particular to which Tasi Baker was referring; that by coming together and researching together rather than operating separately or antagonistically, museums and Indigenous communities can promote healing through cross-cultural education, opportunity, exploration and trust-building.

Jisgang Nika Collison, Curator of the Haida Gwaii Museum, has described this process as one of facilitation:

When people ask me what I'm an expert in, I say, 'knowing where to go.' As in, where the knowledge is. A lot of my work is facilitation. Facilitating the knowledge and stories of incredible, complex people, places, and histories. I didn't like the word 'curator' when I started out. For me the word was quite elitist, individualistic, and prohibitive to real audience engagement. But then I took a class taught by Carol Mayer who used the word 'facilitation' when talking about curation. That changed my mind about what a curator is, can be, or should be. (Collison & Levell, 2018)

Drawing on the theories employed in the work of truth and reconciliation commissions, Norman has branded this curatorial work collectively as 'truth-telling'. She is clear that there can be no place for stereotypes or ignorance in displays which perpetuate the kind of harm Sayet encountered, and that ultimately there is a widespread social good in counteracting them: 'Truth-telling about Native American issues is about more than appeasing source communities, it must hold prominence if museological institutions intend to be honest in their engagement with current social politics' (Norman, 2019i:15–17).

Research becoming a form of healing thus requires truth-telling. This approach is essential in understanding how museums can provide institutional platforms not as pseudo-neutral educational environments, but as active agents of decolonisation, mitigating harm and acknowledging truths, no matter how uncomfortable for a domestic British audience. In part, harm perpetuates because, as Norman and Sayet suggest, this truthful collaborative approach is already hoped for by some Native visitors to UK museums, and its absence can deepen the discomfort they encounter.<sup>4</sup> Research for this Element has demonstrated again and again that many Indigenous North American people view (or expect to view) museum spaces as Indigenous environments in which they can

<sup>4</sup> Taylor Norman has clarified that the main issue here is difference in museums between 'how [Indigenous people] are presented and how they present themselves. The dissonance is entirely on the institutions' side' (pers. com.).



find the solace Sayet sought, and that when they are unable to experience museums in the UK in this way, an emotional response, whether mild irritation or emotional harm, is triggered and exacerbated, not mitigated. As with the tour I gave to Madeline Sayet, encounters which to British museum staff seem routine and benign can, in the context of Native peoples encountering legacies of colonial harm in gallery spaces, become distressing. Good intentions are not enough, if the impacts are harmful.

An example of this was discussed at interview with Danielle Baca, a student of Ute, Apache and Pueblo descent, who explained that she had long been disassociated from her Indigenous heritage, a consequence of her Native family members ‘dying too early and rejecting who they are’ during the twentieth century. Baca noted that this history of grief and erasure had had a serious impact on her personal identity, that ‘I’ve always been taught to not be comfortable with whom I am. I’ve always been taught that it leads to a lot of bad things.’ Studying in London in 2018/19, she sought to research ‘Native American identity and well-being’, employing autoethnography – academic analysis of personal experience – in her engagement with UK museums, and in particular the British Museum. In effect, she was treating the museum space as a site of unstructured personal reconciliation, but in that environment she found that even seemingly innocuous encounters could become troubling:

It sounds sinister, but to get what I want, what I need, in some contexts yes, [I have to hide who I am]. I go to the BM a lot to take photos of different objects in the Museum. I like to go and write. Usually once or twice a week I just go and sit in the Native American Collection and write my feelings out. It feels good, and I like to immerse myself in it that way. And I have been asked by staff . . . who I know worked there because of the way that they displayed their authority on their lanyard on with the badge, who just asked ‘what are you doing here?’

I felt like my behaviour looked [pause]. I was kind of on my knees to take a photo of something and then I was moving around and reading things and then I was sitting on the bench to write, and I think he was noticing those behaviours. And you sit in that moment and you have to make that decision in seconds, but I wasn’t going to say ‘I’m an Indigenous person with feelings, about this and that’, so what I would say is, ‘I’m a student’. I chose that brief, trivialised version of it, and they said ‘OK’ and walked away. (Baca, 2019)

Baca’s story highlights an essential disconnect in engagement between Native visitors seeking a meaningful experiential encounter and British or tourist audiences in search of a learning or entertainment experience. I am certain that the staff member in this instance did not mean to cause offense or appear threatening; their inquiry was ostensibly good-natured and polite, and did not reflect wider policy or suspicion on the part of the institution, but it is clear that

ignorance of how an Indigenous person might experience the gallery, coupled with a gentle but unmistakable exertion of non-Indigenous authority over an ostensibly Indigenous space triggered discomfort in Baca and prevented her from using the space in the way she had intended.

Even in this brief conversation, so seemingly innocuous to those not living with the enduring legacies of colonial oppression, Baca felt unwelcome, both personally and on a broader cultural level. Part of this discomfort comes from the realisation that her mode of engagement with the collections in ways that were meaningful to her as a person of Indigenous decent were unusual enough to attract official attention, precisely the thing her ancestors, who so assiduously practised self-erasure of their Indigenous heritage, would have feared.

Baca and Sayet both approached these museum spaces not as sources of information or entertainment as would a British or tourist visitor, but as memorial spaces in which the objects are inextricably entangled in cultural memory which by their very presence exacerbates the existing internalised trauma of being an Indigenous person in a so-called post-colonial period. Baca's journey was, for family reasons, a journey of self-discovery or rediscovery in which trauma was unexpectedly located over time, whereas for Sayet, by education and profession more closely associated and familiar with marginalised trauma, the impact was immediate and devastating. In both cases though the harm was real and substantial – a space that could have been one of compassion and connection became one of separation and erasure.

Part of the problem is that the living cultures Tasi Baker advocated are missing from displays, which can leave visitors with the impression that Native culture stopped developing at some point in the early twentieth century. Taylor Norman recounted visiting museums in London, searching for but not finding the contemporary material culture of her people and discussion of modern Indigenous life: 'I did feel largely erased with both the British Museum and Horniman's displays as a Black Mvskoke woman ... My visits became more about observation than engagement with my tangible cultural heritage, despite the rich stores of Creek artefacts that exist in London currently' (Norman, 2019i:30). Narragansett student Kimonee Burke criticised the British Museum displays at interview, noting that 'for me it felt very sterile, and it always feels very wrong to see objects from home in such a foreign and unnatural environment. These are real parts of our culture and history and seeing them removed and put behind a glass case it always feels wrong personally ... My tribe wasn't even listed as being in the region!' (Burke, 2019).

The issue these Indigenous women all describe is best engaged with on a theoretical level using Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone, an