

DIGITAL AGNES

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Hauntings in the Digital Sphere: Curating Collection Portals

An Institute for Curatorial Inquiry

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SPEAKERS

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Audience members

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TRANSCRIPT

Jennifer Nicoll: Good afternoon. And thank you for joining us for this panel discussion. Hauntings in the Digital Sphere: Curating Collection Portals, as part of the Institute for Curatorial Inquiry and Museums Without Walls events. We are your moderators. This is Danuta Sierhuis, I'm Jenn Nicoll.

Danuta Sierhuis: We would also like to begin with the land acknowledgments and I would like to acknowledge that we are currently speaking to you from Cataraqui or Kingston, Ontario. And that Agnes Etherington Art Centre and Queen's University is situated on the traditional territories with the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg Peoples. We acknowledge them as the past, present and future caretakers of this land and its waterways. To acknowledge the land is also to recognize the city and the country's longer history predating colonialism and Confederation, and the work that must still be done in decolonizing our spaces and our relations. The digital environment also reproduces the colonial structures and ways of categorizing knowledges and ways of being, including museums and the digital initiatives and databases that we work with. And we also must work to challenge these structures through our work and into the future.

Jennifer Nicoll: The panels theme is one that Agnes staff have been collectively thinking about in the past few years. And it's become more urgent for us as we undertake a major collections digitize -- a major collections digitization project. We are critically thinking about the ways in which museums have or have not presented collections through digital means. We wonder about the relationship between the database and the design of public online interfaces, it's re-stagings of colonialism, the digital manifestations of physical cultural collections. And how we can trouble notions of access and for whom -- and for whom, and to extend these conversations into thinking through how the digital is or is not part of repatriation, or rematriation efforts. Ultimately, we are speculating about the design of more decolonial and community centric data structures, digital interfaces and practices for museum collections.

Danuta Sierhuis: Now, without further ado, we are thrilled to introduce our panelists, Chao Tayiana Maina, Aarati Akkapeddi and Brandie MacDonald. Each will be giving a short presentation of their practices and that after these there will be a Q&A for us to ask our questions of our panelists. Except

for Chao who is unable to join us today. And the panel will also be recorded and will be shared on Digital Agnes at a later date.

Jennifer Nicoll: So without further ado, we will first introduce Chao. Chao Tayiana Maina is a Kenyan digital heritage specialist and a digital humanities scholar, working at the intersection of culture and technology. A computer scientist by profession and historian by passion. Her work focuses on the application of technology in the preservation, engagement and dissemination of African heritage. She is the founder of African Digital Heritage, a co-founder of museum of British Colonialism, and a co-founder of the Open Restitution Africa Project. She holds an MSC in international heritage visualization, with distinction and a BSC in mathematics and computer science. She is a recipient of the Google Anita Borg Scholarship for Women in Technology. Chao couldn't be with us in person today, and will be presenting her talk via a video recording. If you have any questions for Chao, we can pass them along to her following the panel.

Chao Tayiana Maina: Hello, everyone. My name is Chao Tayiana Maina, I am a historian in the digital heritage specialist living and working from Nairobi, Kenya. Now I'm deeply sorry that I couldn't join you today I would have loved to be there in person. But nonetheless, I am deeply honoured and grateful for the opportunity to join you virtually, and to share my work through this video presentation. Now when I received the invitation to speak at this conference, for me it was very, very moving in the sense that many of the subjects that are being talked about through the sessions on digital technology and the hauntings of the digital sphere are very close to my heart. But also are things that I have encountered within my practice over the past ten years. I am the founder of Africa Digital Heritage, which is a nonprofit based in Nairobi that works with museums, archives, communities, to really identify and create holistic, sustainable digital solutions for the archiving and dissemination and preservation of African cultural heritage online. Now I'll begin by sharing my screen. And today, I will be speaking about digital gardens and digital graveyards. I have two screens. If you see me looking to the side, I am just referring to my notes on the other screen. Now, the concept of hauntings in the digital sphere automatically evokes for me the concept of a graveyard. I'll speak about this later. But I do within my discussion, and within my presentation today, I will kind of be playing between the two notions of gardens and graveyards. Now when I started my work within cultural heritage space ten or so years ago, I began by -- sorry. Is that -- yeah, so my first encounter with kind of cultural heritage work was very participatory. This is a project that I started in 2012, between 2012 and 2016, in which I went around the country working as a public historian, documenting railway stations that were just about to demolish -- to be demolished, or were in a very dilapidated state. And so this project for me was really a realization of the intersection of history, the intersection of public infrastructure, and the intersection of memory in Kenya. Now these are some of the photographs that I took travelling more than 500 miles over the past -- over the course of four years. Now this was one-half of the story in which I myself was putting myself into the field to document what history -- what the present looked like at that moment, and how this could form a very rich, contemporary historical archive for the country of Kenya. The other section of this work was delving deep into historical archives to understand one, the origins of the railway in Kenya, which was built by the British during the colonial period in 1896. And here, I encountered a very different kind of historical record compared to what I have been working with, as kind of a contemporary history of the railway. When I reached the archives, I encountered photographs of people, I encountered photographs of landscapes that I could not even

imagine, because so much has changed in, you know, 100 years. But I began to be very, very struck by the nature of the historical archive, and the ways in which certain things are silenced and certain things are more pronounced. The ways in which people are described, the ways in which landscapes are talked of, particularly from a colonial lens. So these are some of the photographs that I encountered at the Nairobi Railway Museum. Oftentimes people are not named, they are solely identified by the ethnic group, if they're lucky, or just classified as unknown. So this photograph just simply says, Massai. And this photograph simply says Wahimbwas, which is a cultural group. And so this kind of very basic way of entering the archives in which people are not named, their dynamics and the complexities of their lives are not relevant to the historical record, was very intriguing for me as someone who was trying to document the history of the railway, from a present day perspective. This is another one of these photographs that I'm picking in the 1890s. And so my work went from being a public historian, working with archives. The other phase of my work that I mostly have to deal with today is working with objects in museums and working with cultural institutions. And now here we have the same thing being replicated just now in the form of the material archive, where an object is simply identified as a drum from X community. Now at the intersection of this kind of understanding of the world through the colonial archive and replicating this material in a digital form, I began to have very, very -- many an unnerving and ending questions within me about what is the danger of replicating this material in this way? Who are we silencing? What are we missing when we keep presenting this as the final and conclusive source of information that we need to know about these subjects. And so the first part of this discussion, talks about encounters with archives, as I have briefly shared. When we encounter archives, we bring ourselves, our understanding of our past, our gaps, our blind spots, and our biases. And so beyond the initial encounter of the archive, a central question for me has always been, what do I learn from the archive, and what do I add to it? So looking at myself as an actual participant, within the process of archive formulation, and that archives are not meant to be static, they're meant to be challenged, they're meant to grow. And they're meant to be contextualized in the full ways in which they can possibly represent. And this brings me to the notion of to us versus about us. So coming from a formerly colonized nation, the idea that most of the archives are written about us, not with us, is very troubling in how I have encountered my history from primary school, after the point where I decided to become a historian. And that brings us into the idea that Saidiya Hartman highlights that it's easy to hate the creator of the archive. What is not easy is to confirm our inheritance of this hate for ourselves. And so I go back to this point of, one encountering the archive and, two being able to add to it or challenge it. As children growing up in Kenya, and going through the public education system, one of the questions that we would be asked in our kind of history exams, was to state the benefits of colonialism or to state two benefits of colonialism. And you know, we're probably nine, ten and we are taught that colonialism brought Christianity and it civilized us. And so you can imagine the violence of this kind of replication of this idea that colonialism was of benefit to us. And how do we challenge it and deconstruct it as adults, but also in kind of a digital -- in kind of a digital form? One of the things that I think is very crucial in deconstructing the hierarchies of knowledge and the hierarchies of knowledge presentation, as we have encountered it in museums and archives and libraries, particularly that originates from the colonial period, is the question of metadata. I believe that the study of archives and the study of catalogues and museum, you know, records, is also a study in resistance. A couple of months ago I came across this photograph in an archive. And the caption simply says, one does not like the camera. Now you can see that there's one individual in this photograph taken in, I think the 1890's, who is clearly resisting, taking the photograph and

does not want to be part of this encounter. I was intrigued by the caption that says that one does not like the camera, when it is clear that the individual has -- does not want to be photographed against their will. And I began to look at the question of metadata as one, not of just disseminating cultural heritage of search and retrieval, but of one of -- with a kind of reparative form of justice in reclaiming agency over the archive. Now to me, metadata really is very crucial in the work that I have done, both as a public historian, going out into the field and documenting various forms of history. It's very crucial in my work, working with museums and digitizing objects, working with archives and digitizing photographs and records. Metadata, I think is the thing that binds the work that we're doing and the kind of data that we're replicating in the digital age. It forms, you know, in a very complex way the labyrinth of underground roots that prop up all the data that we search for in a world where the search engine is king, when we have complex descriptors and identifiers that are misleading. It's very possible that the digital nature in which we are replicating huge amounts of cultural datasets ends up being a more violent form of knowledge reproduction. And so metadata is not just data about data, it is essentially the engine behind the data. Now working on several projects digitizing historical collections, ranging from photographs, newspapers to objects, I think that metadata, and what we're digitizing often in inventory cards, catalogues and other institutional records, gives metadata a very, very prominent point of entry for many audiences, for many specialists, for many researchers, and for many people who work in institutions alike. It's not just the backbone of digital creation, you know, without metadata, data is essentially irretrievable and unidentifiable and unusable. So when we talk about things like metadata standards, we often have to ask ourselves, "whose standards are these." So when you say that, well this particular meta data standard has been agreed upon globally, in a world where epistemologies and knowledge, forms of knowledge are curated and have existed differently, what is the danger of reducing wild cultures from different places into a singular metadata standard? And so my bone of contention with the ways in which we have accepted that casual data can only be described in one way. I think really stems from my experience in the field, and also an understanding that there's always ways in which this data should be able to grow and should be able to evolve. Now I became intrigued with this question when I was working with -- about the question of metadata -- when I was working with museums in different parts of the continent, from Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Senegal, etcetera. Were descriptors such as name, object name, ethnic community as standard within kind of museum catalogues, African museum practitioners would go as far as identifying descriptors such as the material that is used to make an object. They would identify descriptors, such as the age group, such as the ceremony or practice in which an object was used. And if you look at kind of metadata standards, these descriptors are not considered part of all -- of these standards. So this isn't just a question about having multiple descriptors or fewer ones, I think it's a question about knowledge systems at its core, and whether data uniformity is a move towards making data more accessible, or towards stripping very complex cultures of their integrity. I am drawn to a statement by an Antiguan archivist, Dr. Samuel H. Griffin, who says that "We are not trained to manage living things." And I wonder how different metadata would be if we viewed it as describing living cultures, as opposed to the assumption that we are working with cultures that are dead or extinct? How do we describe the hundreds of thousands of collections locked away in museum basements, outside the current descriptors that only serve to represent these objects in the realm of dead things and dead societies? How would we identify objects and archives in our homes, in our national and community museums in a way that captures both the tangible and intangible qualities? Now an exercise that I love to do is that I like to tell -- I like to ask people to pick any object in their home, something

they're wearing, and I say to them, "How would you describe this object?" Something that means something to you, it could even be an earring. And 99% of the time people will say, "Well, I bought this, for example, on a trip to certain place, and if it represents this memory for me, and this is how I use it." Very rarely will people say, "Well, this earring is -- it measures this height. And this is the material points that it's made of. This is what it weighs." So, there's not so much focus on the materiality, rather on the sentimentality and the ways in which these objects mean more to us, based on what they represent. And so it's also a matter of asking ourselves then why should museum objects and archives be subjected solely to being described to them materiality, or through kind of racial categories, as opposed to what they represent to the people who they were taken from? So this idea of kind of dead metadata for me is the crux of the digital graveyard. And I ask myself, then what is the opposite of the digital graveyard? Perhaps it is a digital garden. One in which data is centred around creativity and exploration, is centred around empathy, is centred around biographies of people and objects. And for those of us who dig through archives, what does it mean to care for data, to tend to it, to read it, to weed out the parts that are infesting it, to fertilize it, to enrich it in our different capacities. And to ask ourselves, who is using our data. Essentially, who is eating our data? Who is eating the produce of the data that we are growing in our gardens? And so for me, this exploration really shifts my perspective as a practitioner, because then I begin to look at digital collections as living things. And this brings me to my final point. When we talk about metadata, I think it's also a question of memorialization. What is the link between metadata and memory? I find myself thinking about Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation once more, in which they say that "The intent of which is not to give one voice, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death -- and to reckon the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance." The work of memorialization, and by extension the work of metadata, is not just to mirror the atrocities of the past, which are stuck in time according to particular people, and a particular way of thinking. I think the work of the past, as well as the work of metadata within this context, is really to hold up a mirror to the present as well. And to allow us to continually engage with and uncover aspects of ourselves that are more often than not very painful to deal with, but are still a crucial part of digital data. Now as I end my presentation, which seems to have gone by very fast, I think of other words of Kenyan filmmaker, Wanuri Kahiu, who says that "Assuming here that we are all equal, what is the Western world reacting to? Are they reacting to us as artists? Does our creative impetus derive from challenging the dominant narrative? Or like artists elsewhere, are we driven by the sheer need to create." And this is kind of a problem and a cycle in which we, especially coming from the Global South, continually find ourselves having to challenge the dominant narrative, having to constantly respond to one thing or another. And Wanuri asks in this very beautiful quote, "What would we be if we just had the freedom to imagine what would we create if our sole job was not to respond to a great violence, but just to respond to our humanity, and to the questions that we want to ask ourselves." Now obviously, I apply this to the concept of digital data, and digital thinking, especially within museum practice. Because I believe that the freedom to imagine, the freedom to separate things, to disrupt data structures, is also a freedom to really imagine how knowledge -- or reimagine, rather, how knowledge can exist in the digital age. Now my presentation has very briefly covered the concepts of what it means to digitize huge quantities of data that are lacking in contextual information, versus digitizing small quantities of data that are rich in contextual information. And the concept of a graveyard versus a garden is really not dependent on the quantity of data, but really the quality of it. The quality and the care. And so I think that we also -- it is

important to have conversations around data care and data stewardship, as ways of constantly enriching data. But also engaging with audiences as well. As practitioners and scholars of digital humanities, how does our work humanize or dehumanize? This is a very critical question both in my practice and one that I like to pose in my discussions. How do we use the technology, both in its strengths and the weaknesses that it has to communicate and influence a greater understanding of the past, that has not changed to single agendas, but really has the freedom to imagine intimacy, to imagine complexity, emotion and connection, and to embed this or to even attempt and innovating the ways of embedding this with digital collections and particularly data structures. I like to say that history is hiding everywhere. If you look close enough, it is willing to reveal itself. It's hiding in landscape, it's hiding people, it's hiding in collections, it's hiding in the seemingly mundane. But everything with regards to memory and memorialization is an embodiment of history and culture. And I think viewing these as connections, as ways in which different aspects of different infrastructure, as you know, we can call it from a data perspective is very important. Now with those few remarks, I'd like to end my presentation. I'd like to thank the organizers of the panel for allowing me to still present virtually and I will share links to my work in case anyone would like further information. Thank you very much for listening.

[Applause]

Danuta Sierhuis: So now I will introduce our next panellist. Aarati Akkapeddi, who is a first generation Telugu American interdisciplinary artist, coder and educator based in Lenapehoking, Brooklyn, New York. They combine archival material, code, machine learning and analogue techniques, including photography and printmaking, to create artwork about intergenerational and collective memory. They often use family photographer -- photographs, as a source material, create performative rituals of information extraction. Their work has been supported by Ada X, Utopia Centre for Art and Technology and LES Printshop. They currently teach creative coding in the Design and Technology Department at Parsons.

Aarati Akkapeddi: Hello. So my name is Aarati, I'm really grateful to be here today. I wanted to quickly mention -- I wanted to dedicate this talk to my grandmother, Swarajya Laxmi Akkapeddi, she was born on June 1, 1921 and unfortunately she passed away August 7th, this year. So for the past year or so, I've been working on an artwork called, "I knew that if I walked in your footsteps it would become a ritual." In this work, I trained a machine learning model on family photographs. And using this model I produced, print based and video based work. But before I talk about the work itself, I want to talk about how I got interested in family photographs, and what I've learnt along the way. I'm a first generation New Yorker, I grew up in Lenapehoking. But my parents were born and raised in India, in Chennai and Hyderabad. I became interested in family photographs long before I made the artwork that I mentioned in the beginning. Looking at these images felt like it could be a way to connect with family abroad, and bridge the gap between an understanding -- bridge the gap in understanding between my experiences and theirs. And so for many years, actually I've been collecting, scanning and storing family photos, I now have a little over 1,000 images digitized. And I have a pretty large family. So that's including my extended family as well. And I think when I started collecting images, I thought -- I had thought that the more that I collect, the more I could understand about my family. But I think since undertaking the process of digitizing and looking at these photographs, this idea has changed a lot. And so on this slide, on the left is my grandmother.

This is the last time I saw her actually in July. And when I saw her, she showed me the photograph on the right, which is of her family. And it's a pretty old photograph. I'm not sure about the exact date. But she kept old photographs like that one in a plastic bag under her bed. And I think that -- I wanted to pause on this for a bit, because I think that although the plastic bag under her bed is not "the safest place" for these delicate photos, I actually can't help but think about how this setup is so much more useful to her than the digital copies that I have through my scanning project. And how sometimes the digital is not more accessible. For instance, in a separate undertaking, my family and I were also trying to collectively work on a family tree. And we had all argued and debated over different digital platforms. And in the end, the most successful strategy was actually just printing paper copies of the trees and bringing them to older relatives. And so it was only through pen and paper that we were able to have conversations and fill the gaps. And that's not to say that digitizing images hasn't created some accessibility, especially between allowing these images to be accessible between family members that are far apart. But I think I realized that stewardship of this archive of images and stories as well, was much more about the social than the technical. So it was less about accumulating these digital files and more about having conversations around them. And I also realized that I wasn't necessarily finding the "facts" that I -- around these images that I was originally looking for. At some point, I even had tried crowdsourcing metadata by building a website only for my family members to enter information. But of course, how accessible is an online tool for many of my extended family members, particularly the elders who -- whom I think are the real memory keepers. Right. So also, in trying to fit this information into metadata also meant that I had to make decisions that felt at times quite arbitrary around what information was important to collect. Like do I care about dates, names. For example, do I really care to know the exact date that my grandfather left for Switzerland? Or is it more important to understand how that experience felt for my mother's family and how it did or maybe didn't shape their present. And so realizing that I was more interested in a fluid, emotional and social type of understanding, was a real turning point for me. And creating the artwork that I mentioned in the beginning of this talk was a way to ruminate on that realization. And so I started interviewing family members about the photographs. Through these interviews, I also learned that memory is quite fluid. Names are forgotten. moments documented in photographs are conflated with other ones. This slide shows a text exchange with my mother, where she doesn't recognize a photo of herself, and actually mistakes the photo for a machine learning generated image. She's asking me if I did that. But that's all to say, I think that fluidity in memory is OK. I think that memory can always -- memory is always an approximation. And through approximation, I think that it can become a generative practice. It mutates over time, over place, from person to person. I realized that it's not so much about retracing exact footsteps, as it is about the act itself of remembering and looking to the past to make sense of the present. During the interviews with family members, they never stuck to describing the photograph itself, they nearly always connected the memories behind the images to their current experiences. And so this idea of approximation and mutation, and memories, what drew me to work with machine learning for this artwork, in machine learning algorithms build a model that is able to make predictions based on patterns found in existing data. And so in this work, I'm using a specific type of machine learning called a generative adversarial network, to generate images based on my archive of the family photographs. And so here's an example. The image on the left is of my father. And the image of -- on the right is a generated image that I personally feel looks a lot like my father. I think that the generated images resemble the original photographs as much as they deviate from them. And this felt to me in parallel with what I was thinking about in terms of approximation and mutation with

memory. I also think that because I had combined all of the family photos together for this machine learning model, regardless of time period, there's also a sort of flattening of time. Like some of the images appear sort of in between the black and white photo and colour, as you can see on the right. So I think that could speak a little bit to how, during the interviews, people kind of went back and forth between talking about the past and the present. So for the video portion of this work, I used an additional model called the First Order of Motion Model. This model allows me to animate still images based on facial expressions. So what you're seeing on the screen -- the GIF that you're seeing on the screen is just an example with myself on the left and my facial expressions are kind of a driver for the animation that's happening on the right. And so through this model, I was able to use video footage from family members speaking about family photographs and animate expressions of the generated images. And through gen -- through animating the generated images, rather than directly using interview footage I took of relatives, I hope to create a feeling of intimacy by including the facial expressions that I feel are important to what they're talking about. And also directly including the voices of loved ones while maintaining a certain distance. This distance allowed for a sense of trust from my relatives actually during the interviews, because they knew that their faces would not be directly shown. And so the resulting work is a mix of selected original family photographs and cyanotype prints of the generated images that surround a video piece. This is how I created cyanotype prints from generated images. And on the right is an example of original family photographs with the cyanotypes. And this was kind of how the -- it looks installed. And now depending on how much time I have -- how much time do I have? A few minutes OK, great. Yeah, I'm going to -- I wanted to show some video clips of the work. The video starts with instances where interviewees I guess are struggling to remember. But gradually it moves into instances where they are relating the past to the present. And so depending -- we may not get to the second part but we'll see. So I'll play a little bit, bear with me. OK.

[Video starts playing: sounds of a slide carousel]

>> Oh my god.

>> Why are you laughing.

>> Oh that's a weird picture of me. Looks like I was very tired. Whatever, whatever, I don't even recall when it was, yeah.

>> Do you know how old you were?

>> Must be around the same time.

>> That's Sunder, me and looks like Shyaam.

[Laughter]

>> Can you say who they are, in relation to you?

>> Shyaam is my nephew.

>> And how old are all of you?

>> Hold on, that's me or Kaushik?

>> I think it's you, the tallest one.

>> Hmm. Ummm Sunder. That probably was, I don't know, maybe -- I probably was 11, Sunder probably was seven.

>> OK. And then how old was Shyaam?

>> Shyaam was 18 months. That's when my father passed away.

>> Which one is you in this?

>> It's this one.

>> OK. Because his teeth are not like that. Yeah, might be you. This is different, it's not you. Yeah that's not him.

>> No that's Santosh.

>> Yeah, oh. No, Santosh is very good looking.

[Laughter]

>> That's me, Sudha! I know it.

[Slide carousel sound]

>> He's very familiar and he used to -- he brought his wife, children after marriage also but I don't remember his name. I'm not getting the name now. [Speaking Telugu]. Murthy, yeah his name is Murthy.

[Slide carousel sound]

>> We got married in Hyderabad in 1989. October 10th in 1989, October 10th, yeah. So it was an arranged --

>> Seventh

>> Oopsies, right, October 7th, yeah. Hey, you remember, I'm surprised. Yeah, October 10th is his birthday, 7th is our wedding, yeah.

>> This one, I don't know who they are.

>> No?

>> Maybe [speaking Telugu] cousin, I don't, I don't know. I'm not sure. I have not seen them even. How you got the picture I know -- I don't know.

>> From your house.

>> Not possible -- maybe his cousins or somebody, you know, I never saw that picture.

>> Yeah. That's your house in Madras?

>> No, we didn't have a piano in the house. That's not my house.

>> Piano?

>> No, no whatever there -- that's not my house.

>> That's a radio?

>> Music system.

>> Yeah we never had those.

>> Maybe it's your auntie's house?

>> No they don't have those.

>> It's not our house...Is it Sreenivas's house?

>> Yeah it could be Sreenivas's, maybe, I don't know. I just like that sari though.

>> Why?

>> Because when my father passed away, I wore that sari. I still have it.

>> Do you ever wear it?

>> No. No, I just want to keep it.

[Slide carousel sound]

>> I'll pause it here for time, but thank you very much.

[Applause]

Jennifer Nicoll: I would now like to introduce Brandie MacDonald, who is Chickasaw and Choctaw. And her work focuses on system -- systemic change in museums internationally. Currently, she is the Senior Director of Decolonizing Initiatives at the Museum of Us. Her 16 years working in nonprofits is based around capacity building, through transformative policy, repatriation and education. In addition to her work at the museum, Brandie is an active freelance consultant working to support decolonial change in nonprofits and museums. She's also enrolled in an education studies PhD program at University of California, San Diego. Her research focuses on the sustainable application of decolonizing practice in museums that enables transformative change and movement building. She holds a Master of Education in international education from Loyola University Chicago and a BA in applied anthropology from the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. Thank you for being here with us, Brandie and for taking a long journey to visit us.

[Background Sounds]

Brandie MacDonald: Can you all hear me? Yes. OK. Sorry. It was a little change plans, because I realized I talk with my hands which probably won't work holding a mic as well. [Speaking Indigenous language] Hello, my name is Brandie MacDonald, pronouns she, her. I'm a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation with ancestral ties to the Choctaw Nation. I'm so grateful to be here with you all today. Thank you for the invitation to come out here, for coordinating all of my travel and supporting me around the hiccups of the travel. Thank you all for giving your time and space. Your time is so valuable. And you're sitting here with us today. And thank you for sharing your family with us as well. So grateful for you all. So I'm the Senior Director of Decolonizing Initiatives at the Museum of Us. This is our museum. A little bit about what the journey we're going to take today. I'm going to kind of say a little bit of the roadmap. I'm going to talk about the museum, give a footprint of the museum, talk about our decolonial framework, which then we'll show why we've leaned into the digital curation space the way that we have, because of our decolonizing initiatives and because of the commitment that we have to Indigenous communities. So this is our building. This is a museum that I walk into every day. It was built in 1915. It was always an anthropology museum, made to look like a church, but not a church at all. It has nine colonizers etched into the skin of the façade. From the very tip top all the way to the flanking of the door, colonizers who actively perpetrated harm to Indigenous peoples all over the Americas, all over the Pacific Coast, conquistadores, missionaries, mapmakers, chart makers. Our museum again has always been an anthropology museum. So it was birthed from the colonial endeavour, profited from colonization, and continue to re -- continues to reproduce colonial harm. That's my job though. And that's our team's job now is to redress the colonial impact that we've had. The land that the museum sits on, the land that the park sits on, we reside in Balboa Park, is ancestral homeland to the Kumeyaay peoples. Kumeyaay peoples have always steward the land, continue to steward the land. And we owe a huge debt to Kumeyaay peoples. The museum has done terrible, terrible thing, thanks to Kumeyaay peoples. Some terrible things to Indigenous peoples and Black peoples and peoples of colour all over the world. And yet communities still continue to work with us, one because they want their ancestors back. They want to work with us to get their repatriation, some of their cultural objects back. And they work with us because they believe in some of the work that we're working to do. They believe in decolonization, they believe in redressing colonial harm. And we're working to

build that trust. And they believe in our team members, which I think says a lot for over 100 years of perpetrating harm. So I'm going to start with definitions in terms of the definitions that we work from in the museum. So we really think about what Indigenization is, and really thinking about Indigenization as the blending of two communities. And really thinking about honouring, continuing to create space and privilege, Indigenous voices. Fully recognizing that Indigenization is not decolonization, it is part of decolonization, but it doesn't stop there. When we're doing decolonial work at the Museum of Us, or outside of the Museum of Us, we really want to recognize that de -- that Indigenization is part of it. So you can't do decolonial work without working with Indigenous people. But it's also a process. Decolonization for us is a verb, it is an action, it doesn't stop at the end of our deliverable for a grant and we wipe our hands off, then we move on, and now we're doing equity work. No, it's our work from here on out, right. And so we're really thinking about divesting from the colonial culture. Really thinking about what does it look like to challenge that authority, challenge these best practices that museums have always sit in? What does it look like to think about the Euro American construct? What it's supposed to be versus the way that Indigenous communities and Black communities and communities of colour, the people with these objects and the ancestors, where they came from, that they're connected to. Their stories, the way that they see it, the way they think about it, the way that they know that it is the past, present, and the future. Also really recognizing that is actively redressing that colonial harm. I don't know if museums will ever be decolonized. I don't know if anything is ever going to be decolonized. We sit in a society that is heavily colonial, all over the world. That doesn't mean we shouldn't try. So it's really again, thinking not about that endpoint, not the period at the end of the sentence, but the process. So this is the footprint of our museum, y'all. So we have over 75,000 ethnographic cultural resources from all over the world. We are actively repatriating cultural resources. We are also actively repatriating ancestors. We have around, that we know of, 7,500 ancestors. We continue to find ancestors. We continue to find cultural resources, the more we do inventory. We have ancestors and cultural resources from communities everywhere except for I think Norway that we know of, which really shows the colonial collecting practices of our institution. We have a moratorium on accessioning right at the moment. So we're not actively bringing in cultural resources, or ancestors, or anything. We're -- our focus is heavily focussed on repatriation, and working with communities to rebuild trust. So when we think about decolonizing principles, especially for our organization, we're really thinking about these five spaces. These are our guiding principles. And that's because of the footprint of the museum, we have actively harmed Indigenous communities, we have actively harmed communities of colour. And so really thinking about what is our guiding principles for our work moving forward? I'm not going to go into the deep of these. But I'm going to show you a couple of examples in terms of the tangible examples later on. And then I'm also going to show you this slide right here. I'm not -- this is a very beefy slide. But it's really to show that our work, at least the work from my department, because I'm from the decolonizing initiatives department, is systemic. We see decolonizing initiatives, it's not just that really great thing that collections does, or that fun thing that education talks about, or the thing that they pay Brandie to go to other places to talk about. But it is systemic. It is in our human resources policy. It is in our education policy. It's in our culture. And so when we think about that systemic change and making it sustainable, we think about it in these two spheres. Because policy and practice need to work together. Because we can do really great practice, and we can change the culture. But if the policy doesn't back it up, and let's say I leave one day to go have a falcon farm, there's nothing to hold the next person accountable, right? Because the policy and the structure doesn't change. The same thing thinking about the

practice. I can write beautiful policy, maybe beautiful policy all day long. And then it lives on our digital shared drive. Nobody accesses it. And so that doesn't necessarily enforce because again if our team leaves, then there's -- next folks that come in completely different structure. So we really want to think about what that looks like for us moving together, so that it outlives me, so that it outlives our CEO, that it really is changing the organizational culture, and also creating a structure that will help other institutions to apply this to their organization too. Changing the field is really one of our tenants that we're trying to work for because it's not just us that's perpetrated harm, it's all of us have. So consent and repatriation, mentioned this, very important for us. Consent is at the heart of it. And so when we think about the digital curation spaces, we think about metadata, we're really thinking about what that looks like to make sure that we have consent. So for many times within our cultural resources, our museum, much like other museums, have just put photos of cultural resources online, we've made digital exhibits, all these spaces. But we didn't talk to the community that they were from, we were putting metadata online, on Flickr. And then the community finds out that their cultural resources are online, their ancestral pieces are online, ceremonial pieces. And we didn't tell them, or they're not supposed to be because protocols are not supposed to be on display. And so working with our community, because of our colonial legacy, our community has said, "No. We do not want you all to put anything online. None of our cultural resources, without consent." So everything we had digital, we have taken off. And now before we even think about putting anything online, and also we're working the same practice with on display, the physical display is consent. So we want to make sure every piece that's out, we have consent from the digital -- or from the descendant community, if possible. This policy was pivotal in that space. This is our colonial pathways policy. I'm not going to get into the deep of it but the synopsis of it is that anything in our cultural resources holding, if it came to us through a colonial pathway needs to go home if the community wants it to go home. The other thing that this says is that if the community doesn't want it to go home, or they're not ready for it to go home, that we store this cultural resource, and that's both the tangible and the intangible, the way that they want us to store it. And so that can mean in a lot of different things, from feeding the ancestors, to making sure that photos of the ancestors or photos of the person who created the cultural resource is sitting next to the basket. Because we're making sure that their relatives are connected to their relatives. Recognizing that these cultural resources for many Indigenous communities are alive. They're connected to their past, their present and their future. And we need to honour that. Not all cultural resources. And some communities say that that's not the case. But we want to make sure that if that is the case, that that is a space where we pivot and honour those requests and needs from the cultural community. This is how we define colonial pathways. I'm not going to go in it, but I just have this in here in case you all are interested. It's fully accessible online as well. So if you have some questions, I can send you the PDF, or there's a link right there that you can also find the PDF on our website. But this is where we look at stewardship. Right. So stewardship is really important. So thinking about what that looks like, thinking about the words that we use in our cultural resource management space, in our CRM or collections management database that we have. We have so much information in our database, and a lot of it is racist and harmful and made by people who are not from that community. And so we don't want to lose that data. Because sometimes those words are the only words that the community has to find their cultural resources. So what we do is we work with consultations with cultural communities, with tribal communities, and with other communities to make sure that we're collecting all of that information, and then finding out what is the priority. What is the priority main title that they want? Is it versus say, an "olla" which is a Spanish word for a bottle or a container?

Then what is the community -- what do Kumeyaay peoples want us to call it? They want us to call it a jar? Great. So we have jar as the primary word and phrasing that all of our community uses. Our staff internally and externally. And then we have backup information for search purposes. So if we need to look up that specific word. We also have protocols within our database to where if the image should not be seen by me, because of gender protocols, because of season protocols, then it says we have a picture up there, and we have image concealed because of cultural protocols. And then we have the reasoning of the cultural protocol and the description. And then we have a separate folder, so that if communities ask for that, we can send them that information. But it's not necessarily something that I see. Or that I should see if the community says I should not see it. And so respecting that we shouldn't see everything if the community doesn't want it. It's really what does the community want from us? And so that's a space where when we think about our practice is really humbling ourselves in that space and recognizing that we're not the experts, and that we don't-- we shouldn't and we shouldn't and we don't have privilege to everything. If the community says no, then it means no. And they may say yes to someone else. And we have to be OK with that. Because we have a legacy maybe that's different than someone else. This is another space. So when we started working with Google, Google wanted us to be like the Smithsonian. They were like, you know, Smithsonian has all these things and you have all these things too. And we're like, well we have a lot of cultural resources. Yes. And they were like well the Smithsonian, they take their resources and their objects and their artifacts and they stick them on our website and then we do all this 3D pictures and you find out all the data and then people can do research and think about the access. And we were like, no that's not what we do. Because the community has told us no. And they were like, but the Smithsonian does it? And we're like that's great, but we're not the Smithsonian. And that's not what the community wants from us. And they've been very clear. And so they still wanted to partner with us, which was wild. And so what we also talked about was, when they kept saying an object for a picture, we were like what do you mean by the word object? And really, they just meant a picture. A picture of something. And so we really pushed on their definitions, and thought about well what has the community, Indigenous and non-community, have been asking us to do for decades? They've been asking us to talk about these colonizers on the façade. And tell the truth, all the truth about the colonizers on the façade. Because communities throughout San Diego, throughout California, the US uplift their legacy, these men, these missionaries, these conquistadores, but they're celebrating the legacy. Similar to what Chao said, right. Really thinking about like what that looks like, around what are the benefits of colonization. And that's what we did by staying silent for so long as well. Or even just redirecting them to the History Centre. And so that's where we decided to lean in because the community decided this for us. We had some internal debate at the museum because it was during the death of George Floyd, it was during all of the Black Lives Matter protests that still are continuing on. But during around '20, '21, midst of the pandemic. Some of our executive directors were like, we should be doing anti-racism. This is what's happening in the community right now. And this is where my department really stepped in and leaned in and said, you know, the community is not asking us to do anti-racism work. The community is asking us to do decolonial work. And this is what we should be doing. It was very long conversation. And we ended up doing this anyways. And so we came to a collective consensus. We have done an anti-racist space, we realized that this was top priority in order to continue to walk through the values that we've committed and walk through the commitment that we've made with the communities. So essentially, what this is, is we start off in the first three slides where we're truth telling and accountability. Where on the digital space, we are talking about our

decolonial space, we're reflecting our values. And so really recognizing how we have perpetrated harm, how we've degraded and disregarded indigenous communities by celebrating this dominant historical narrative, and the ways in which that it's been racist. We also talk about the way we've reinforced colonial power by not talking about it, and now is the time for us to do better and be better. We also pull from our archives, and pull from some of the historical images. We also recognize how important it is for us to triangulate the data and show that it's more than just the Spanish colonial building. It's more than just this bridge that's called Coronado Bridge. That it is this moment of time in the colonial space that these images and they art building, which is a historical monument, what it represents. And really recognizing how it is a reflection and a reinforcement of the Doctrine of Discovery. You see these boxes. So within this digital space, we go into the nine colonizers on the space. We give a brief bit of history about each one, as much as you can to keep people's attention within a digital space. This is an example of one of them. So this is Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo. He was a Conquistador. He was a terrible, vicious, violent Conquistador. He has these monuments all over the world. He has his monuments all over Southern California. And so what we did was we showed various points within our spaces. We look at a national monument where it has a statue of him that you have to pay \$20 US to park there and take pictures, which is Indigenous land. We also talk about the bridge. If you see in that middle photo here, that's a historic bridge that you have to pass over to get to the park that the museum resides in. It's called Balboa Park. Balboa is also a colonizer just so you all know. But this is a historically protected bridge. We talk about where he's at on our facade and how he kidnapped Indigenous Kumeyaay peoples. We also talk about their spaces in Southern California in San Diego where he is credited with discovering Kumeyaay people, and being the first Conquistador that Kumeyaay people saw. Y'all, he was not the first Spanish person, he was not the first Conquistador that Kumeyaay people saw and connected with and traded with. And yet he gets credited with it. So we really want to recognize the way that the truths don't match up. And the ways that these -- this construct of someone's history continues to get perpetuated, but it's not factual. And we also recognize that things that we drive on every day, that we tell people and directions on how to get to our museum like our highway 163 was at one point named after Cabrillo, and used to be Cabrillo Highway, and it was changed. So I say all of this, because when I think about our work, and I think about the work that y'all are doing, the work that I've been hearing folks talk about this whole time, it's really sitting in a space of reflection and thinking about what we're doing now, what we've done in the past, and the journey moving forward. And how all of that is connected. Indigenous temporalities, is that not this -- it's not this linear space, it's really a nonlinear space. And so thinking about these, these are the questions that I ask our team to sit in. These are the questions that I sit in and that keep me up at night. These are the questions that I offer you all when I think about the decolonial journey that we're engaging with together in this conversation. And it can be applicable in a lot of different spaces and thinking about the ways that we benefit from the displacement, dispossession and erasure of Indigenous people. What are these tangible pieces that we can move through and change based on where we are? What do we have the power to change? So that's the end of my presentation. Here's my contact, if you would like to contact me. That's also my dog and his best friend, Eleanor. If you all see him. He's best friends with a chicken. But please reach out if you have any questions or any questions about some of the other slides. And then I don't know how to -- OK. Thank you.

[Applause]

>> Danuta Sierhuis: Thank you so much Brandie, and Aarati and Chao, for sharing your practices with us this afternoon. We will move into the Q&A. And so Jenn and I have a few questions that we'll just start off with, and then we'll open up the floor for all of your questions. So we thought we would begin with a question directed to Aarati. In your presentation, or maybe a previous iteration of your presentation, you briefly talked a little bit about algorithmic bias and machine learning. And we were wondering how in digital archives, and that kind of machine and computer vision, that is used in your practice, if you could talk a little bit more about the kind of algorithmic biases, and how do you think like a larger archive, such as a museum collection, could combat this bias?

Aarati Akkapeddi: Sorry, having a little trouble with my mic. Thank you for the question. I guess starting with my own work and how I've been using machine learning. My machine learning model is actually very biased. It's -- and I think that's because my family archivist are biased. The example that comes to mind is, I have more photographs from my mother's side, because for a few reasons, but my father didn't have as much access to a camera, and various other reasons. So my machine -- the machine learning model tends to produce, in my opinion, more often generated images that look more -- that have characteristics that I think look more like, from my mom's side than my dad's side. And so I guess for me, I was OK with this, because I was thinking about the machine learning model as a reflection of the archive and the bias is there. And it's true. So -- but I think at a larger scale, I personally am of the belief that there's always going to be bias in a machine learning model, because there's always bias in any dataset or collection. And I think in terms of -- I think -- so I guess like, it's not really so much -- I think of it not so much as combating that bias, but understanding it more and moving really, really slowly and carefully. And also, just one technical point. I know with machine learning a lot of times people work from pre-trained models. Meaning like, using a model that's already been trained on massive amounts of data, and then kind of training on top of that -- I guess to sort of make that process a little bit shorter and more smaller scale. Especially when working with smaller datasets. But I did not do that. I didn't use pre-trained data because I think we have to be really careful about kind of lumping together a pre-trained model with something that you're training. Because then you're using data that you may not understand or necessarily know where it comes from. And usually it's scraped from like sites like Flickr, YouTube, and it's hard to kind of track who -- whose information has been part -- become part of this model.

Danuta Sierhuis: Awesome. Thank you.

Jennifer Nicoll: Brandie, you talked about the relentless march and authority structure of industry best practices. And Chao touched on this too, a little bit, or sorry, a lot, as it relates to metadata. What do you think -- what are some good ways that we as colonial institutions can begin to deconstruct these practices? And I'm specifically asking about that around metadata and data that we enter into collections management databases.

Brandie MacDonald: Can you all hear me? Yes. OK. So I think, at least from where I sit, I think there's a variety of different touch points. I think initially it's pausing. I think when we think about this relentless march, we have our deadlines, we have our agenda, we have our timeline that we're working in. But the community has a different timeline, right. They have their priorities, they have their work, they have their timeline, and they also the impact of colonization. And it varies depending on the different community. And they also have a history with you. And that varies

depending on the timeline, depending on the colonization. And so -- or the impacts of colonization in the ways that you've currently passed, and even potentially in the future may harm them. So really, thinking about that and recognizing that pausing is important. And it's not pausing and being like, we're not going to work with them because they hate us. But it's pausing, and it's an actionable pause. And say -- and sitting in a space, humbling yourself and asking the community, "What do they want?" How do they want it to be told? Because I think metadata is really important when we think about the ways like who decides what goes in the system? Who decides on those words, and the weight of the words. What is the priority of the words? Because we see that. We see that in Indigenous collections all over us, who's decided what something is called. You saw photos, right from a variety of different people of the past couple of days that show this -- it's labelled a certain way. Who's the one that decided that, right? Was it the Indigenous person? Probably not, Was it the person in the picture? Probably not. It was the person maybe taking the picture, or the donor who decides, right. And all of this information is detached. I also really think -- and I know that I mentioned about repatriation. But when we think about consultations, I think it's really important for an organization to share everything. You're sharing that metadata, you're sharing that information with communities coming in. That is a huge step for our organization. When we do consultations with communities, Indigenous and on, were fully transparent. We're sending that in the Excel sheets, we're talking about the tangible and intangible. When we are repatriating, we are repatriating that data back. And we're finding more data, because, you know, it's kind of messy in collections departments. But we're finding out that we've made mistakes. We're approaching the community, we're saying that we're sorry, and then we're also repatriating it again, and try and continuing to build and rebuild trust. I think that for us it's really important. Because for so long, there's been these secrets and these constructs of mine, mine, mine, mine from museums, and it's not yours, it was taken. And that belongs to the community. All of those layers belong to the community. Yeah.

Jennifer Nicoll: Thank you. Yeah. That's a really interesting concept to repatriate that data too and the metadata. Thank you. I think we're going to open up questions to the audience. Is there anybody? Yeah, are you OK to come and talk up at the mic?

Audience member: Hello, my name is Lou, thank you for this talk. So my question is for you. I find your work incredible. And I was wondering if you could like talk about what drove you to make it and what it is that you hope to like inspire people with that work? Or like what's like the next step that you would like to come from the work that you're presenting? If that makes sense.

Aarati Akkapeddi: Yeah, thank you so much. I keep getting tangled. So I guess -- I think I had started making the work, or the work kind of grew out of the effort to scan and digitize. And I kind of mentioned it during the talk, but I feel like at first I had started to scan and digitize with the idea of like understanding more about my family by collecting more and more data, like collecting more information. But then I think realizing that that wasn't working [laughs]. And it was more about talking to people, talking to family members, than it was about figuring out exact dates or information behind the images. So I think that's -- that turning point is kind of where the work came out. Because it really -- I think came -- or I think a really important part of the work was interviews. And I think the interviewing actually, in terms of where the work goes next or what I hope comes out of it, I think the interviews have really stuck with me. Maybe even more than like thinking about

machine learning as a metaphor for memory. Because I think it's encouraged me to do more interviews, even outside of this project, like just talk to -- have conversations with family members. Like I did an oral history with my grandmother that passed recently. And I'm so glad I did, because I learnt a lot about her that I wouldn't have otherwise. And I don't think I'm going to do anything with that audio. It's really just for me. So, yeah, I guess I hope that it encourages conversations, especially with elders. I feel like I've been thinking about that a lot lately. And also understanding that memory is something that is fluid and kind of changes within context and from person to person. And objects can kind of be more of a catalyst for remembering rather than like, putting so much importance in the object or photograph itself.

Lou: Thank you.

Aarati Akkapeddi: Thank you.

Audience member: Thank you both. That was super interesting. And I think Aarati, it's so interesting that your work came before Brandie's presentation, because the issue of consent is on the forefront, right, and it's your family. And so it was an example of kind of, let's say, doing something in a good way. I think ethically and so a lot of the violations, Brandie you were talking about kind of we're in contrast to this practice. I have a question for you, Brandie. I'm wondering -- you kept saying the community, the community and there are many communities, obviously, that where the belongings come from and ancestors. And so I presume it's easier when there is a nation with a reservation or some kind of governance structure. But what do you do -- I don't know what your protocol is about urban places. And this is a big issue here in Canada, you know, where people come from a lot of places, and also that there aren't always organizations. And so who do you seek consent from? And how -- what kind of methods have you developed? Thanks.

Brandie MacDonald: I love this question. Thank you so much. So it's hard. I think the short answer. Because I don't think that there's one way. And I don't know if there's a right answer, necessarily all the time. And I think even if you do, like we have federally recognized tribes in the US, and then we have state recognized tribes who sometimes aren't recognized by the federal government, and then we have non-recognized tribes at all. And that also doesn't cover Indigenous people in Guam or these other areas where the Imperial US has taken. And so they have these different rights that are given by the colonizer, right, and these different levels of governance by communities. And those vary. And it does make it a little bit easier when we're working with federally recognized or state recognized communities. And that doesn't mean they always agree, right. And I think that that's the thing is that they're not going to agree. And I think that that's legitimate. They don't have to agree. And so when we sit in those spaces, we take a step back. Even though the state law or the government, like the federal government law usually gives us the authority to make some of these repatriation decisions, especially under this federal law called the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, NAGPRA. It says that we make those decisions on who's right and wrong. But for us as an organization, we recognized that that should be the ground, and we should - like it shouldn't be the ceiling that we work from. We're building from the ground, not making that the ceiling. So we take a step back and say, "You know what, you all are not agreeing, it may not happen in a couple of months. It may happen in two years. But you all need to agree in those spaces." When we work with other communities, I think an example would be probably a recent

project that we are doing with the Maya community members. And so Maya peoples are all over the world. And they -- the impact that colonization has had on Maya peoples, there's Maya peoples in their homeland, but all -- their homeland is diverse and large. And then there's Maya peoples in diaspora all over the world. And so we just did a reframing, a refresh and consultations with Maya individuals for one of our permanent exhibits. And that was a huge question and actually kept our team members in this cycle of not doing anything for a really long time, even though we were sitting on grant money. Because they were like, "Well who's the community? What is -- who do we talk to?" And that who is an important question that sometimes that "who" is used as a tool to not do the work, right. And so we really again, that's when I came in and took the pause and said, OK, so what does that look like in our space in Southern California. We have cultural resources that are in a state of diaspora, because they have been taken from their home and stolen from their home. And so what does that look like to talk to Maya peoples in Southern California, that are from the diaspora? And what does that look like in our area? And then when we found folks in our area, we asked him, who else should we be talking to? Because we have a variety of different cultural resources from different regions. Like the Yucatan Peninsula or this other in Chiapas. But the folks in our area weren't necessarily descended from those spaces. And so then they connected us with other folks. So we ended up with an advisory committee of, I want to say six people, mostly Maya scholars and historians. And then we had a Maya artist who did a mural on the wall. And then what we did from that point, we also send out surveys and content. And we created this policy with these Maya Advisory Committee counsellors, guidance folks that said, if it needs to change because other Maya peoples need it to change, then we need to structure this reframe of the exhibit in a way that can be changeable. Where we can lift this text panel out, change it out. Because it's probably going to be different. And so I think that was really important for us. And now we're working with communities, this same Advisory Council and then other community members who started engaging with us because of the commitment that we were really transparent about, and what that looks like for access policy. What does it look like for repatriation? The other thing that we went -- we did in this exhibit that I'm just -- not a part of your question, but I want to share it because I'm so excited about it y'all. That the community wanted us to do is they wanted us to talk about colonization, physically talk about it, and talk about that provenance, and show the metadata to everyone. And so we have an entire section in their exhibit that they wanted, that has the physical cultural resource, and it has the provenance. And it shows that this cultural resource, this offering bowl was stolen by the donor's father, who worked in a mining company, who was the advisor, or the one of the governance bodies in the mining company, who went scuba diving in a sacred lake and came back with three offering bowls, that we now have in our collection. We have pieces like that from the missionaries, we talked about land, we talked about the united root. That information that was hidden in our archives, and hidden on our servers, is now physically out in the open for everyone. And then we also have an entire panel that -- or an entire display case, that we don't have any provenance at all. And we -- we're honest about that. We said, what about these items? You've now learnt about four or five different pieces, but we don't have any information about this? What does that make you feel? What do you think that that looks like in other museums? And so that was really important for us to try and find a way to bridge the physical and the digital space. And also to hear what those Maya folks and Indigenous folks have been asking us to do. So it was probably and plus for your answer.

Audience member: I have a question that's sort of a follow up to that question about metadata. It seems to me that this conversation has been talking about the sort of the limits of knowability of how much we can know about certain things. And I found it really interesting, Brandie, that you were talking about, in response to metadata that one solution, possible solution is transparency in conversations with community. My question is, and it could be for anyone on this panel. It's -- is transparency the same as access? And are there any limitations to full transparency as well, sort of following -- I'm thinking about what Judith Butler said that like what -- with transparency, what is left opaque?

Brandie MacDonald: So I would say yes and no. So transparency is not necessarily access. It depends on the community. And so I think an example is, I think we can be transparent about the process and we can be transparent about the access policies that we have in place. But we have access policies that we've been working with for years on with the Kumeyaay community, the Kumeyaay nation. And we've been working with -- they have a collective council that makes decisions for all of the bands, the Kumeyaay bands. So they have elected officials to go in that space. And one of the things that they pointed out to us, and we were like, yeah, you all are right is that for hundreds of years we've just let a lot of folks in and had access to our space, but not Indigenous people. We've let scholars, researchers, curators, all these people that just had like this excitement because they really loved mummified ancestors. We've let all of them in. But when Indigenous community members, when Kumeyaay, community members wanted to see their ancestors and their objects and their resource, their relatives, we said, "No." Or we've accused them of stealing or something like that while they were visiting their relatives, their objects. And so working with them, they've set what access looks like through a policy to where they said, certain folks can see this, certain folks can see this, and if you're not Kumeyaay, then you need to come and ask us if you can see it or not, and tell us exactly what you want to see. And then we'll give you a letter. And so -- and then you can take that to the museum. And so then we abide by those very specific parameters that the community has approved for them to see. So we apply that now as kind of our base structure, because that was the first access policy that we have. We're working with the Maya advisory council, and our advisory council has been really clear like well we can't speak for all Maya peoples. And also, they're also like we see our cultural resources different than Maya peoples, right. Because we work in a space where like minimal disturbance, not because we don't want to lose items, and you know, it's really easy to lose something if you set it down. But we also don't want to disturb these items. And so -- but Maya peoples were like no, we should be touching those. Like you should be disturbing these items because they're alive. And so -- and because they need to be connected. And so we also have been working with them around an advisory and an access policy on what that looks like for -- is it all Indigenous people can have access to Maya items. And so in terms of transparency, right, and how that's not access, well transparency is we're very clear about our access policies to folks. But that doesn't mean that we are telling folks because of that access policy, everything we have in our holding, unless there Kumeyaay, and then we're very transparent. Unless they're the community and then we're very transparent. And I think that that's where it's really thinking about what that access to that knowledge and thinking about transparency in relationship to telling you all about our work. And being transparent about the mistakes we make. Because we make them all the time. I apologize a lot, because we do make mistakes. And we've done harm. And we're still doing harm. And we're doing good things too. But mistakes are going to happen. And I think that that's just an inherent part of the work too. So I think that kind of that's where we sit. And

sometimes it is muddied and sometimes we don't know. And sometimes we think that we know and then the community comes back and they're mad because they were like, we didn't approve this. And we're like, oh. So then we have to reengage and then shift or revisit, We've got a clause in there about the access policy where we revisit it every I think two or three years, because new elected officials come in, the community may be in a different space. And so recognizing that it's fluid, and it's not static, because the community is also not static.

Aarati Akkapeddi: I guess I'll just add a couple, I guess, anecdotes from my work. But in terms of transparency and access, I think I've had to think a lot about how transparent I want to be with the data that I collected, which are family photographs. And for this work I showed some of the family photographs in the installation, but they were kind of handpicked carefully to be photos of close family members that I could ask permission from. And then in terms of like the machine learning model, I don't plan on showing like the data that went into it, or the model itself, or making it accessible. And the work is not interactive. It's a video and I think, yeah, I've made those choices, because I feel like I've actually gotten some requests from certain family members to not be shown. And I've also -- I also can't ask everyone because I actually don't really even know some of the -- like who is in every photograph and my family is so extensive too. So yeah. And then I think the last point I'll add is I also have a lot of -- I have a little bit of a digital graveyard I guess, to refer to -- what Chao was mentioning that I'm trying to turn into a digital garden hopefully. But yeah, I basically have a lot of files that are family photos, right. And I have this idea that I would -- not as part of this art project, but just in general make them accessible to family members. Especially because my family is spread out across the globe. But that's kind of been at a standstill because I don't know how to address some of these questions about not being able to ask or even know everyone that's in each photograph, just having like an insurmountable -- Like 1,000 photographs is not a lot in terms of machine learning, but for me to pour over each one and really be careful takes time and also like being that -- again to refer to Chao, that metadata is kind of like the backbone of how you might search through an archive like this. I don't know how to structure that metadata because it always has felt a little bit arbitrary to me to try to boil information down to certain categories or points or -- Yeah, so. And also once I do that, I don't know how much accessibility that'll even create, right. Especially for my older relatives that may not even have a computer or internet access, or things like this. So I'm actually thinking about books, maybe making a book might actually be the solution to this.

Brandie MacDonald: I have one other thing I just want to add in terms of transparency and something that we are processing and access to the information. Processing at the museum and consistently processing, I think. Is that our marketing team and our executive directors and our organization wants to promote, they want to be transparent. But it's -- we sit in a space that I consistently work with reminding folks is -- what is -- we're not -- we shouldn't be actively seeking the news to advertise this. We shouldn't be patting ourselves back with a -- on the back, excuse me, with a journalist. I mean like we just repatriated 21 ancestors. We should have never had those ancestors, right. And so what does that look like in terms of when we're thinking about where we tell our team members that we just repatriated ancestors. But we're not actively seeking out news articles to celebrate this work. Because we're internally celebrating this, we're also not asking the community to pat us on the back for doing this work as well. Because we shouldn't be. And so thinking about that transparency and just being really conscious about sometimes how transparency

can be co-opted by these tools of white supremacy, thinking about how access points can be co-opted by white supremacy and colonialism. And what is it -- how are we defining these words, right. Thinking about what is -- if we think the community, Indigenous community or the work -- the folks that we're working on, how are they defining it and how can we apply that to those cultural resources? But making sure it's fluid so that folks can step in, not us folks, but other folks from the -- who are descendants, can step in and edit it if need be. But I think that that's some space that we are constantly moving back and forth in, because it is a space that I don't -- I think it gets really muddy. Because we do want to promote it. We need grants, like I need a grant to cover my job. So what does it look like to promote it and talk about it, but to talk about it in a way that is decolonial, that's decolonizing, that's in a space of trying to be humble and celebratory at the same time. And I don't know if that we always have the right answer. But we definitely sit in a space of not trying to seek out a journalist to write an article in the Washington Post or the New York Times about it. Sometimes we do get put in the Washington Post by surprise, which is always an interesting space when you get an email from someone they're like, look you're in the news, which is great. But that is, I think, that's from the periphery versus us trying to ask for it directly.

Danuta Sierhuis: Thank you so much, Brandie and Aarati for these answers to all of our questions and for sharing so generously, your time and knowledge and your practices. It is time for a break in the proceedings for the day, I will just mention these subsequent things for the rest of you to enjoy for the rest of the day. From 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., there will be the second iteration of a manifesto for radical care which takes place outside. There is a continuation of sorts of this discussion in the workshop that both Jen and I will be facilitating in the contemporary feature gallery. And on the topic of manifesting, reimagined collection portals and what this will entail. And then there's also the exhibiting net art talk with Michael Connor later this afternoon. And also in the André Biéler Studio, there is the workshop collective world making envisioning futures through machine collaborations, part two, with Teodora Farten. So thank you all so, so much for coming with us along this discussion. And I hope to see you around the event later today as well. Thank you. Thank you again to both of you, and to Chao.

[Applause]