

# INTRODUCTION

## A Bowl's Journey, There and Back Again

### Behind the Scenes

AS YOU ENTER POD 2 AT THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION'S MUSEUM Support Center in Suitland, Maryland, you are welcomed by a notice of the most recent insect sighting posted to the double doors. Lights flicker on, revealing the first of three levels. Fire suppression pipes and forced air conduits snake below the ceiling. A twelve-digit alphanumeric code—a storage location—requires you to search for numbers stenciled on the floor, indicating the row and section. Passing carts and crated treasures removed from their storage locations, you turn right into a long, repeated line of inward-facing white metal cabinets. Your finger moves over the code to reach the cabinet number. You use a small brass key to unlock the right-hand door, and you quickly check to make sure this cabinet does not require venting due to the accumulation of aerosolized mercury. Your nose senses a change from the ordered monotony of white metal to things that have long endured the passage of time. The shelf number requires a search for a ladder, whose wheels simultaneously jingle and rumble as you roll them over the concrete floor. Climbing two steps grants visual access to objects arranged like puzzle pieces, though you cannot immediately decipher the scene. A tag with a number and barcode clings to each object. Your eyes scan as you repeat the catalog number under your breath, searching for the match. And there it is, E40241, a hand-formed and painted ceramic bowl. With gloved hands you lean in to remove it from the case. It is not entirely remarkable—there are many similar bowls in this case and many of the other cases. But this one's story—its routes down unusual avenues—is obscured by its ordinary character. For now, nothing about it seems to make it more or less unique than its neighbors.

It was more than a year between the time I first encountered, handled, measured, and photographed this object to when I began to unearth details of its past transit. Before the case was ever opened, I knew one fragment of this object's story. As part of the Smithsonian's US National Museum (USNM) accession 009899, it was collected in 1879 by the Bureau of American Ethnology's (BAE) field research team in the American Southwest, headed by Colonel James Stevenson under the direction of Major John Wesley Powell.<sup>1</sup> It had been collected at the Pueblo of Zuni, where it most likely had been bartered for manufactured trade goods. It was moved via wagon to the new rail lines creeping across New Mexico, then crated and shipped to Washington, DC. Upon Stevenson's return to the East Coast, and likely assisted in large part by his wife and fellow anthropologist Matilda Coxe Stevenson, he described this (and many similar bowls) in his illustrated catalog of collections made among the Indigenous peoples of the Southwest.<sup>2</sup> After it had been transferred by the BAE to the anthropology department of the USNM, it was assigned a catalog number and its attributes recorded in volume 9 of the catalog ledger book. The cataloger described it as "Earthenware Eating bowl; *sab, tsan, na*; Expedition of Maj Powell to Pueblos of Zuni; Collected by JS Stevenson and FH Cushing; Entered into [the ledger] 1880 March; 1 specimen."<sup>3</sup>

The stories and fates of thousands of objects collected by the BAE remain closely tied to the stories and fates of the institution that preserves them—the Smithsonian Institution, whose natural history and anthropology collections in the USNM became the National Museum of Natural History in 1957. Objects from this collection have been displayed in museum exhibits, have traveled to world's fairs, been loaned to other museums, been accessed by researchers and source community members, and have been rehoused and stored by museum professionals. Now most are kept in Pod 2 of the Museum Support Center. But this bowl's itinerary is distinguished by a century-long detour.<sup>4</sup>

In 1903 a trustee of the public library in Jackson, Tennessee, wrote to Smithsonian secretary Samuel Langley requesting the donation of a collection of natural history and anthropological specimens to be used as an educational display for library patrons. In just over a month's time, the Smithsonian sent a collection of geologic and ethnologic specimens to Jackson, including this ceramic bowl. The bowl remained in the library likely through the 1960s. Prior to 1980 it found its way into the private collection of local Jacksonian Jaime Towne. Following Towne's death, his widow donated objects to the Pinson Mounds State Park, where they were displayed in the archaeological visitor's center display. In 2007 state archaeologists visited the site, inspected these culturally and geographi-

cally displaced objects, and recognized markings on the objects indicating their BAE provenance. They contacted the anthropology department at the Smithsonian with an offer to return the objects. Smithsonian staff agreed, and the bowl was among six former Smithsonian objects that were returned. The original catalog numbers were retained, and a summary of the events were placed in the accession file and recorded in the electronic museum catalog. After more than a century in Tennessee, the bowl was reinstated into collections at the Smithsonian.<sup>5</sup>

## Studying Museum Collections

The itinerary of ceramic bowl E40241 is remarkable, sharing a kind of kinetic kinship with thousands of human remains and objects that museums have, particularly in the decades since the passage of the repatriation legislation in the United States, returned to descendent communities.<sup>6</sup> The transit of objects back to their former owners, claimants, and stewards serves as a reminder of the histories of collecting, particularly of anthropological material by museums in the West. Many of the well-known histories of collecting and collections focus on a unidirectional movement—objects from peripheral places travel to museums in the urban metropolises.<sup>7</sup> Though museums have then extended objects beyond the physical boundaries of the collection through loans or digitization projects, or even lost objects through intellectual or physical displacement or deterioration, museums have long been understood to be places of accumulation and knowledge production.

The fact that the majority of objects have remained in museum collections since the passage of repatriation legislation does not mean knowledge experts have not been engaged in innovative labors to reassemble and reconnect collections to stakeholders, and to activate latent knowledges. The opposite is true. Museum and collections-based work in the past four decades has prioritized source community engagements, while calling for decolonizing methodologies.<sup>8</sup> Recent approaches to museum collections have resulted in increased recognition of Indigenous agency, local renegotiations of the potential of digital mediations, developments of collection access protocols, and the training of early career scholars in collections-based methodologies.<sup>9</sup> While much of this work still happens within the space of the museum, museum staff have increasingly reevaluated their professional practices to address barriers to access and engagement. Cara Krmpotich and Laura Peers note how the handling of fragile objects by “enthusiastic [Haida] delegates” brought on feelings of unease

among Pitt Rivers Museum staff, but it was these very sessions that led to the “the most intriguing and revealing encounters,” and subsequent “transfer and confirmation of knowledge across generations and across cultures.”<sup>10</sup> Though the benefits of repatriating materials from museum collections is always context dependent, the physical movement of objects back into descendent communities’ hands results in different enactments of use and care.<sup>11</sup> Margaret Bruchac’s pioneering work on wampum belts is an aspirational example of how museum collections and archives are critical to creating a deeper understanding of these objects and their histories, in some cases leading to the restoration of wampum to rightful owners.<sup>12</sup>

Museums with anthropological collections have increased their efforts to connect with descendent communities, while also making those relationships increasingly visible. Much of this happens within the physical and epistemological space of the museum. The basic terms of the relationships are mediated by the modern museum’s emergence within a historical period of colonialism, while the fundamental structures of the museum have centered on collecting, classification, and exhibition.<sup>13</sup> Tony Bennett has argued for an understanding of museums as “civic laboratories,” in that they mediate relations between experts and citizens in “the context of programmes of social and civic management.”<sup>14</sup> This raises a central question of whom museums have been for, and what purpose they serve in statecraft. Within a settler colonial context, Indigenous scholar Amy Lonetree reminds us that “museums can be very painful sites for Native peoples, as they are intimately tied to the colonization process.”<sup>15</sup> Repatriation has been one response to this situation. But the movement of objects out of museums is not new.

Museum collections contain enormous potential to reveal the connections and relationships that have hitherto been less visible or illegible. A relational approach to uncovering the social connections woven through collections using network theory and computerized databases invites the characterization of museum collections as “multi-sited, multi-authored, emergent entities.”<sup>16</sup> These connections can be visualized and quantified, but, more importantly, they provide new starting points for deeper research into the nature, depth, and intricacies of social connections.<sup>17</sup> Methodologically, scholarship of this sort still tends to focus on objects that remain in museums, and I suggest that this serves to reify the accumulative character of museums. In writing about scholarly networks of British colonial science, Tamson Pietsch notes that “specimens did not simply flow back to Europe from collectors on the colonial periphery,” but rather they “moved along lines of personal connection.”<sup>18</sup> Social relationships were shaped by scientific institutions, influencing the circulations of

objects that *sometimes* flowed into museums. The use of network theories to unpack museum collections has also produced new theoretical engagements focusing on agency and materiality within museum collections. Attention to the agency of creator communities in the exclusion of certain objects from cross-cultural exchange and museum contexts acknowledges the complex dynamics of why some objects evade museum collections.<sup>19</sup> The recognition and engagement with the relational qualities of museum objects have opened up new discourses and interventions within the space of the museum and the digital arena, and in descendent communities.<sup>20</sup>

## The Argument

What are museums? In his well-known work *The Birth of the Museum*, Tony Bennett argues that museums, as spaces of representation, are distinguished by being “involved in the practice of ‘showing and telling’: that is, of exhibiting artefacts and/or persons in a manner calculated to embody and communicate specific cultural meaning and values.”<sup>21</sup> Like international exhibitions and modern fairs, museums are places that contextualize and display objects, and regulate their visitors’ experiences. In *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 1884–1945*, Chris Gosden and Frances Larson, with Alison Petch, suggest that the museum is a “repository of social histories in material form,” and approach it as a place around which “innumerable sets of connections between people and objects” extend over time and space.<sup>22</sup> The museum holds evidence of social connections and exchanges, manifesting those histories through objects and documents. Taken together, these approaches suggest that the museum is a place where objects are brought together through the collective efforts of many people, recontextualized with respect to past histories and future use.

This book considers the archival nature of museums, the partial, yet characteristic function of museums as repositories.<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault’s characterization of museums as heterotopias, places that invite “real sites that can be found within the culture” to be “represented, contested, and inverted,” also draws on the idea of accumulation. Museums accumulate time, forming “a sort of general archive . . . the idea of constituting a place of all times.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Bruno Latour argues that the emergence of centers of calculation, such as modern museums of natural history, are reliant on the mobility of things that can be extracted from their in situ contexts. Once made mobile, stable, and combinable, objects are brought together as collections, allowing scientists to “see new things.”<sup>25</sup> There is no deny-

ing that museums do bring objects from distant places into a physical and epistemological space. However, museum histories “tend to focus on processes of concentration: the growth and consolidation of collections,” producing narratives that Felix Driver and Sonia Ashmore argue overlook the mobility of objects, and the various forms of their circulation within and through museums.<sup>26</sup> This book suggests that museums are dynamic archives, offering an institutional and cultural context through which objects move. The fact of the common existence of a museum’s collection, composed of material objects and information, further suggests an association between accumulation and archiving. While the existence of objects in repose on or off display may be a common and perhaps definitive feature of the modern museum, this book explores the practices that shaped the nineteenth-century museum’s permanent collection. I consider policies and practices of the movements of museum objects in order to demonstrate how the (im)permanency of particular objects within the museum’s collection are produced through intellectual and practical contingencies.

The museum is a compulsive collector, classifier, and exhibitor. It is an archive of things but also norms and values, processes and decisions, that have shaped the contents of its collection over time. Sara Byala emphasizes the haphazard nature of the museum-as-archive, both collecting with intention while accumulating things of apparent disinterest.<sup>27</sup> Collection staff will attest to this truth. For as many errant things there are to be found in the bowels of the museum, there are material traces of the absence of former presence, in plain sight of a critical eye on catalogs and registration records.

In his critique of the archive, literary scholar David Greetham emphasizes the “contingent, temporary, and culturally self-referential, even self-laudatory” decisions that shape the contents of the archive.<sup>28</sup> While Greetham’s critique focuses on those things that are excluded from archival collection to begin with, he also broaches the work of archival editors. Decisions made by archival and museum staff a century ago (or in the not-so-distant past) may seem neglectful, even repressive. But Greetham’s focus on culturally mediated acts of inclusion and exclusion in the formation of the archive remind us that archives are not neutral or passive, but are instead “active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed.”<sup>29</sup> Inasmuch as the museum archive collects only certain objects, it ultimately keeps only certain objects. It is not always a penitentiary arresting the movements of objects in the outside world, but rather a context through which some objects are elided; material remnants of those movements have something to say about particular interests, motivations, and values of those working in and around museums.

This book considers a specific kind of museum practice, what I refer to as specimen exchange. In its most elementary form, it involves the permanent removal of classified and cataloged specimens out of museum collections and into new contexts. These new contexts may be, and often were, other museum collections. But as the story of the ceramic bowl shows, this was not always the case. The USNM used thousands of anthropological specimens as currency with trading partners ranging from politicians and private collectors to primary school teachers.<sup>30</sup> There are thousands of little-known pathways of objects *out* of the museum, unfolding hand in hand with the well-known efforts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to build an anthropological museum collection reflective of an expanding nation.<sup>31</sup>

How can a museum's collections be used to tell new histories of the museum, particularly those histories that address the definitive features of what museums are understood to be? Rather than using the lens of collection and accumulation to understand the museum, this book pursues an optic reversal of seeing the museum through object dispersals in order to emphasize its character as a dynamic archive. The enclosing nature of the museum as archive belies its history as a place not only of keeping, but of giving. The legal and ethical landscapes of claiming ownership and custody are persistent reminders that objects and people have always been on the move.<sup>32</sup> Digital cultural heritage archives now seek to connect museum objects and information across organizational boundaries, reflecting the reality that museums may function as repositories, but they are as much centrifugal as they are centripetal.<sup>33</sup> Objects in the past have had to traverse their structures, and will continue to do so in the future. Collecting, circulation, and display are cultural practices that unfold across and beyond museums.

## Specimen Exchange Defined

The story of ceramic bowl E40241 is one of thousands of stories located in anthropological objects that have been removed from the collections of the USNM and sent permanently to other museums, private collections, libraries, high schools, and universities from about the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. Taken as a whole, these objects moved out of the Smithsonian through the practice of specimen exchange. This is both a practice and a terminology that anthropological museum curators and collections managers no longer engage in on a regular basis, but one that remains in use in natural history collections.

Exchange and transfer are methods of object disposal familiar to museum professionals across all subject areas, but the central concept used to designate the objects exchanged—duplicate specimens—has been applied primarily to natural history and anthropology collections.

The data I use to explore the keeping and valuing of objects pertains to the exchange of anthropological specimens, primarily by the Smithsonian Institution in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. The trade and transit of specimens of material culture—that is, human-fashioned objects—occurred in conjunction with the animal, vegetable, and mineral specimens of natural history. Rather than take on this practice across subject areas, I focus on anthropological exchanges in order to brook a deeper engagement with disciplinary history, method, and theory. Developments at the disciplinary level in the use, meaning, and availability of anthropological museum objects during the twentieth century are responsible for the practice of specimen exchange declining within anthropological museum collections. Changes to classification schemas, research questions, and the politics of museum collections have played out in anthropological collections in very different ways from natural history collections.

What is specimen exchange? The terminology alone requires an explanation. A specimen is a natural or cultural object that has been described with respect to the scientific system of knowledge. Within museum-based discourse, an object or artifact is transformed into a specimen as human agents bring observational and experimental techniques to generate a category-based description, or classification. Our ceramic bowl is transformed from a utilitarian and decorative artifact formed and used by a Zuni individual to an artifactual illustration in the museum, a representative of a kind-of-thing. Our object's description is inscribed into the museum catalog using the category of form and function: an eating bowl; of material: ceramic; of its maker(s) and user(s): the Zuni people; of its collectors: James Stevenson and Frank Hamilton Cushing. The *specimen* may be glossed as a Zuni ceramic eating bowl.

The practice of exchange or trading of specimens relies on each partner's ability to relinquish any claim to the title and physical custody of a specimen, essentially to resign ownership under a Western property model. This requires a valuation be applied to the museum specimens that constitute a kind-of-thing. Stevenson and Cushing collected hundreds of Zuni ceramic eating bowls that vary in size, design, and quality, but all of these bowls constitute one kind-of-thing as determined by the human agent that applies the category-based description that classifies them. The agents involved in the exchange determine which and how many of the Zuni

ceramic eating bowls should be retained and which and how many may be relinquished through exchange. These decisions involve the valuation of specimens with respect to many factors, but the outcome of this process renders for each trading partner a group of specimens that are kept and a group that may be exchanged. Specimens that constitute the latter group are called “duplicates.”

A basic model of specimen exchange occurs when one party (an institution or an individual) trades one or more of its duplicate specimens for an equivalent in duplicate specimens or desired currency with another party. The putative purpose of specimen exchange was to diversify collections under an encyclopedic model. Exchange was therefore a technique used to expand the variety of kinds-of-things held by museums or in discrete collections while reducing the number of redundant, repetitive, or duplicative examples of kinds-of-things. A Zuni ceramic eating bowl that the USNM’s ethnology curator determines to be a duplicate specimen on the basis that it was one of thousands in the category could then be exchanged with another museum offering duplicates from its own collection. These offered specimens were desirable to the USNM because they were not adequately or at all represented in the USNM collection.

Anthropologist Jude Philp evokes the widespread and global scale of this practice in the nineteenth century through reference to the “specimen exchange industry.”<sup>34</sup> Specimen exchange was a regular practice among collectors, curators, and scientists that spanned natural history and anthropological institutions. A century ago, a request to exchange was as common as a loan or research request would be today. Susan Sheets-Pyenson characterizes specimen exchange as a common mechanism for growing natural history collections.<sup>35</sup> Though some museums restricted participation in specimen exchange as a matter of policy, behavioral norms and practices were shared throughout the scientific and collecting communities. Central among these norms and practices was the exchange of duplicate specimens. From an anthropological perspective, this shared community of practice negotiated which specimens were duplicates and, in so doing, mapped value onto these objects through decisions to give or keep them.<sup>36</sup>

Recent scholarship on specimen exchange has benefitted from engagements with disciplinary and museum histories, as well as interests in circulation and object mobilities. Echoing Philp’s discussion of the specimen exchange industry, Lianne McTavish writes about the “museum marketplace,” where the “international trade of objects between museums constructed a web of social, cultural and economic meanings.”<sup>37</sup> Rather than relegate specimen exchange to an accounting of objects given and received, Brooke Penaloza Patzak’s historical investigation of international exchanges

beginning in the late nineteenth century considers how museum objects (including duplicates), knowledge, and scholars moved through space and time, contouring intellectual and scientific landscapes.<sup>38</sup> Christian Feest's detailed study of the exodus of Brazilian objects from the exchange reserve of Vienna's Imperial Museum of Natural History offers a reconstructed history of particular object pathways, and reveals some of the challenges that museum record-keeping systems present to researchers.<sup>39</sup> Through a large-scale longitudinal study of archival and registration records pertaining to the exchange and distribution of botanic specimens at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Felix Driver, Caroline Cornish, and Laura Newman offer a reconceptualization of the museum not as a storehouse, but as a clearinghouse for incoming collections, an exchange partner, and a supplier of duplicate specimens to formal educational institutions.<sup>40</sup> Specimen exchange has eclipsed mere mention as a museum practice, and has emerged as a new lens through which to understand museums and their collections.

## Deaccessioning and Exchanging for Mission

In *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, editor Gail Anderson chronicles the upheavals and reevaluations that museums have undergone in the past century. As a cultural institution, the museum has been transformed through a hard look at "fundamental assumptions about museum operations." This reflexive exercise has brought about a "dramatic paradigm shift" in which the museum has moved from being "collections-driven" to "visitor-centered." I agree with Anderson's observation that, "at the heart of the reinvention of the museum is the desire by museum professionals to position the museum to be relevant and to provide the most good in society."<sup>41</sup> But change is easier on paper than it is in practice.

Though institutional priorities have shifted from collections to audience, changes in professional practice and organizational structure can feel glacial, and even be generational. And top-down mandates may be alienating for seasoned museum staff and volunteers. Though the reinvented museum reflects prioritization of inclusivity, of audience and community, of the development of new missions and visions, my experience in museums (as both a practitioner and a scholar) leads me to think that this reinvention may be more aspirational than conclusive. Museums implicitly remain beholden to, or even constrained by, their organizational functions. The organizational structure of many museums separates collections from education, and curatorial from the exhibits and education departments.

This undoubtedly produces tensions that cut straight to the museum's *raison d'être*, as Diana Marsh incisively explores in her ethnography of the making of the Smithsonian's fossil halls.<sup>42</sup>

Inasmuch as I agree with Richard Handler that the museum is a “social arena” and “not a repository of objects,” it is still an “institution in which social relationships are oriented *in terms of* a collection of objects.”<sup>43</sup> Steven Conn has traced the relative importance and presence of objects in museums over the past century. Though museum type makes a difference, he contends that “the place of objects in museums of all kinds has shrunk dramatically.”<sup>44</sup> To their visitors, exhibits are no longer sites of “visual abundance,” and glass cases once chockfull of specimens in natural history museums have been replaced by dioramas and interactives.<sup>45</sup> Taken off exhibit, the vast majority of objects are exiled to storage. Storage facilities, argues Conn, are “parallel museum universe[s], access to which is generally quite restricted.”<sup>46</sup> Though museums visitors see only a small percentage of a museum's collection, collections demand constant care and this costs money.

Writing about the development of the most recent collections preservation facility for the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, Kelly Tomajko recounts that in the 1990s the museum began focusing attention on “its collection stewardship obligation” through staff professionalization, equipment upgrades, and “improving storage methods and materials.” Still, by 2008 collections were stored in “forty-nine different rooms” and were “at risk from overcrowding and uncontrolled environmental conditions.” Space to add to collections was “nonexistent.”<sup>47</sup> The solution was to build an underground wing, the Avenir Center, a “sustainable state-of-the-art collection preservation facility.”<sup>48</sup> Half of the cost of the design and construction of the facility was raised from a bond initiative approved by Denver voters. While Denver has a strong history of municipal support for its museums, the point here is that collections care requires consistent organizational resources, punctuated by major capital campaigns. Collections cost money.

Tomajko notes that once the bond measure was approved, the museum undertook the development of the “Long-Term Collections and Research Plan to ensure that the considerable resources required to build and operate a collection facility were devoted to *only those collections that advance the museum's mission.*” Curatorial staff outlined “strengths and weaknesses” in the collections, and the plan “outlined future acquisition priorities, and identified targeted deaccession opportunities to bring collections into closer alignment with the museum's mission.”<sup>49</sup> Tomajko does not elaborate further on deaccessioning priorities or principles, since this is the purview of curators. The *Long-Term Collections & Research Plan* itself indicates

that objects subject to deaccession in the American ethnology collections are designated on the basis of being “unethically or illegally obtained.”<sup>50</sup> American archaeology curators offered the following statement on deaccessioning: “Collections lacking provenience information, that are not from the greater Rocky Mountain region, that have little or no research value, that are not exhibition-quality, that are on permanent loan from other institutions, that belong to federal agencies, or that can be claimed under NAGPRA, will be proposed for deaccession. We do not believe that any of these collections should be kept for their own sake.”<sup>51</sup> Minerals was the only department to mention the deaccessioning of duplicate specimens.

The Denver Museum of Nature & Science *Plan* reflects a mission-driven approach to collections stewardship and care that includes critical topics such as deaccessioning. As Elizabeth Varner notes, financial pressures have precipitated “a need for museums to reevaluate and consolidate their collections, [while] misinformation, confusion and public hostility towards deaccessioning has persisted.”<sup>52</sup> Deaccessioning is covered in foundational handbooks and guidelines for the museum field, urging museum professionals to first consider if objects should be removed, followed by the appropriate method for disposal.<sup>53</sup> These are usually not easy conversations to have or decisions to make. Steven Miller characterizes deaccessioning as the “most controversial of museum practices.”<sup>54</sup> The deaccessioning of economically valuable museum objects makes for a good headline, and questionable practices have had severe consequences for some museums.<sup>55</sup> Gwen Corder’s study of deaccessioning in small museums in Kentucky and Indiana indicates that deaccessioning funds were commonly used to finance operational costs, a decision in direct conflict with professional museum standards.<sup>56</sup> This a practice that can easily erode trust in institutions that the public sees as being fundamentally and functionally acquisitory in nature.<sup>57</sup>

Though the term came into wide use in the 1970s, deaccessioning is not new. Malaro defines the term as “the permanent removal of an object that was once accessioned into a museum collection.”<sup>58</sup> As evidenced by the story of our bowl, the object was professionally collected, described in a scientific publication, cataloged, and added to the USNM collections where it remained for twenty-three years before being permanently removed and given to the Jackson Free Library. Specimen exchange is deaccessioning by definition; a deep look into its widespread and regular practice has much to tell us about what museums have been, and what they can be. Museums have not only been sites of accumulation, but also their object archives were dynamic, with new and valuable specimens frequently moving in because of the ability to move out duplicative but representative specimens.

Specimen exchange as deaccessioning in the distant past intersects with recent and provocative scholarship and professional conceptual tools for responding to the problems of expansive collections and their stewardship demands. The Active Collections project is a grassroots effort in the museum field to “develop a new approach to collections,” as best practices in this area have “lagged behind other areas of museum practice” in a field moving toward inclusivity and dialogue, and the centrality of audience.<sup>59</sup> Relationship to mission and societal impact are major emphases. Trevor Jones’s collections tier tool lays out the evaluative basis on which objects should be kept and cared for, a shorthand for understanding their relevance to mission and impact. Jones notes that initial discussions for developing his museum’s tier system were “sometimes contentious” but “helped clarify previously unspoken assumptions and shed light on how different departments viewed the role of collections.”<sup>60</sup> This process and discourse is extraordinarily important, since it asks museum professionals to articulate their own interests, motivations, and values in doing museum work. Clarity and honesty about one’s own professional values is especially needed for museum staff in all aspects of their labor—from fundraising to external partnerships and collaborations. Similarly, Nick Merriman’s discussion of assessing collections and ascribing value to objects is an essential practice as museums pursue sustainable operations.<sup>61</sup>

As much as the archival record will allow, this book considers the role of specimen exchange in the formation of the Smithsonian Institution and the USNM, the extent of specimen exchange practice in anthropology, and the interests and motivations of curators and administrators. Exchange has allowed for continual efforts of specialized compilation and accumulation as well as dissemination of ideas through objects serving as visible and tangible evidence that could be referred to for more than a single research project. Specimen exchange is one medium through which we might envision the museum as a dynamic archive, and attention to its practices can offer new ideas drawn from old practices. Duplicate specimens were deaccessioned from the originating museum’s collection while being accessioned into the receiver’s collection. The uses to which these objects were put are variable, but many were responsive to local needs. Described and scientifically authenticated objects were used represent non-local peoples and places. They were used as models for teaching natural history collecting techniques and observational science. They have come to be used in the interpretation of local histories, as a means of telling the stories of notable individuals and institutions associated with the movement of specimens from the Smithsonian to places like Jackson, Tennessee; or Fairfield, Iowa.<sup>62</sup>

While these acts of deaccessioning did shift the content of Smithsonian collections resulting in an untold number of duplicate specimens being excluded from the public trust, the transit of these objects tells us that past museum administrators and curators were both generous and responsive to the requests and needs of international colleagues as well as provincial educators. I interpret these actions as intensely mission-driven, since they were consistently done in a way that exemplified the Smithsonian's mission of increasing and disseminating knowledge. Though museums often find institutional definition in the collection and preservation of objects, conceptualizing the museum as a dynamic archive brings about new possibilities and terms to initiate mission-driven activities. It is my hope that readers will glean from this telling some of the benefits of specimen exchange—reducing storage needs; encouraging decentralized, object-based education; and extending communities of object-based scholarship and practice. My intent in this work is to invite contemporary museum practitioners and scholars to consider how a historical practice could engender the development of new policies and practices for how museum collections are cared for and used.

## Book Layout

This book is one among many that presents a partial history of the Smithsonian Institution. This is an extraordinarily daunting task, and one that consistently eludes definitive telling. My focus is on the nineteenth-century Smithsonian: the Institution's early history unfolds largely through the agendas and actions of the first two secretaries, Joseph Henry and Spencer Baird. By the 1880s, with the blossoming of the scientific departments and a separate building for the USNM, I turn my attention to the major players in the museum's administration and the Department of Anthropology. The practices and precedents concretized in the late-nineteenth-century of Smithsonian anthropology persisted into the early decades of the twentieth century, primarily through the actions of long-term professional staff—individuals like Walter Hough—that had been influenced and trained by the best-known of the early American anthropologists at the Smithsonian: John Wesley Powell, William Henry Holmes, and Otis Tufton Mason.

This book is a history of the Smithsonian's USNM and Department of Anthropology as told through specimen exchange. Because specimen exchange requires consideration not only of getting and keeping, *but also giving*, I see it as a productive means of reconsidering a variety of Smithsonian histories: institutional, organizational, disciplinary, and biographical.

In the first part I consider three areas of scholarly and professional interest in museums: formation and mission, collections-building, and curation. In general, my analysis focuses less on the specific content of individual exchanges—that is, I write very little about the individual objects entangled in moments of circulation. I attend more to exchange events and specimen quantities to discuss how specimen exchange shapes each of these three areas of the museum. In the first two chapters I highlight the role of specimen exchange in building collections at a time when the museum functions of the Smithsonian were in their infancy. Chapter 3 provides a sense of the diversity of exchange partners both in geographic location and social position, and the tenor of exchange negotiations. Chapter 4 examines the dynamics of exchanges between anthropologists and offers an explanation for the decline of anthropological specimen exchange.

In the second part I turn my attention to the specific objects circulating through networks of exchange. My analysis focuses on museum objects, which are defined as the physical-material thing plus the metadata: the information about the thing inscribed into catalogs, publications, and archival records. I explore the central concept on which the operation of specimen exchange relies: the duplicate. In chapter 5 I consider the epistemological foundations of the concept of the duplicate within the broad context of natural history as a scientific practice. I consider how factors of object quality and rarity intersected with how curators designated duplicates for exchange. In chapter 6 I further position the exchange of anthropological duplicates within disciplinary knowledge frameworks of the time, especially those espoused by Smithsonian ethnology curator Otis Mason. Through study of duplicates themselves, I triangulate how curators may have operationalized this concept. I consider how category-based similarity is produced through museum technologies such as classification conventions, cataloging procedures, and visual verisimilitude.

## Critical Collections Management

Every day museum professionals navigate and interact with systems of organization created in the past. Consultation of the century- or decades-old accession file, a cross-check of the electronic database with the card catalog retained for redundancy, or conservation records and condition reports—these records are essential to museum practice in the areas of loans, exhibitions, repatriation, inventory, and research. The ability to translate handwriting and decode abbreviations used by predecessors is a necessary skill. I have often witnessed (and also felt) great frustration

at now-departed individuals who failed to keep track of information and procedures, or kept spotty and unorganized records. Institutional memory can be a challenge for museums, especially since they seem to be mostly in the business of keeping-in-perpetuity. Museums are also in the business of remembering through objects; to effectively do so they must also remember their own histories. Although acquisition of knowledge and experience with best practices is important, we should not neglect the history of our institutions. The reverberations of decisions made by our professional predecessors resurface regularly, and must be understood within historical and political contexts, particularly for those individuals interested in decolonizing methodologies.

Efforts to form a community of professional museum practice across the United States began in the late nineteenth century, building on growing interest in the public aspects of the museum—exhibitions and education. George Brown Goode, assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in charge of the USNM, is often cited as an influential figure in professionalization. While some of Goode's principles are foundational, the museum community continues to propel itself forward, developing codes of ethics and statements concerning equity and accessibility, implementing accreditation programs, and making visible the ways in which museums are valuable to the public. While maintaining such foundational principles such as orderly collections and a public focus, there are some practices that we consider outdated, dangerous, or complicit in maintaining structures of power.

Specimen exchange might be considered—by some—to be one of those practices. Certainly, it is outdated because it is no longer understood by anthropologists to be a means of growing one's collection of anthropological objects. Specimen exchange at the Smithsonian resulted in the movement of thousands of anthropological objects out of the permanent collection and into state museums, colleges, public libraries, and even high schools. It has proven difficult to locate former Smithsonian objects at libraries and schools, since the institutional function of both places are not oriented toward the perpetual retention of objects. I have had success only when these objects have found their way back into museums or private collections. In one case, a former Smithsonian object exchanged with congressional representative Joel Heatwole located *me* when its current owner encountered an abstract of a paper I was giving on the exchange with Heatwole via Google search.<sup>63</sup>

Whichever side of the argument one gravitates to—that specimen exchange was an embodiment of the Smithsonian's mission, or that it was a dangerous practice that has resulted in the loss of thousands of natural and

cultural objects from the public trust—it is important to understand the purpose and extent of the practice, particularly for all those museum professionals who work or endeavor to work in collections.<sup>64</sup> It was, in part, an interaction with a collections manager that contributed to my interest in this topic. As I ran my first in-house KE EMu report on accession 009899 at the glacially slow computer terminal in the Museum Support Center, I was urged to first sort by record type. Object records that were marked “Removed” or “Cancelled” should be discarded, since these indicated objects that were no longer in collections storage. Digital humanists might consider this initial sort as a part of cleaning one’s data set. But this missive speaks to a common and reasonable assumption—that a researcher would come to a museum to see things that were physically present and would not be interested in objects that had formerly been part of the collection. Though I was curious about what had gone on to bring about the fact that this would mean deleting hundreds of records from my search, I understood a conversation about deaccessioning might not be the best foot to start off on. It is, after all, a most controversial topic. I pursued my interest steadily, grateful for the old notations directing me to the routes removed objects had embarked on. This venture into the museum’s past opened up not only a fertile area of research, but also contributed to an understanding of the energy and excitement museum curators brought to building their collections, working in a community of practice, and supporting the proliferation of museum and anthropological practice across the world.

This is a book written with a particular audience in mind: those individuals that work (and aspire to work) in museums, around museums, and on behalf of museums. Before I undertook the research that led to this book, I worked for five years developing exhibits for a small university museum. Since it was small, I worked on exhibits, but also did a little of everything else. Prior to that position, I worked or interned in collections, education, and museum administration. For the seven years since completing my doctoral work I have directed a small ethnographic teaching and research collection. I have spent many hours sewing tags onto textiles, cutting foam core into the early hours of the morning, guiding tours in which I set beaver traps while clothed in period dress and working with museum board and staff committees to update codes of ethics as well as document retention and destruction policies. I consider myself both a museum ethnographer and a practitioner, and my professional positionality has guided both my interest in and my understanding of specimen exchange and duplicates.

My intention is to provide an interpretation of this topic that contributes to ongoing discussions about the relationship between collections and museums as institutions. While all museum professionals need to have

a fundamental understanding of collections, some of us work with (or in) collections more closely than others, particularly collections managers, registrars, curators, and conservators. There is a small but growing field of scholarship in museum studies that Cara Krmpotich has called “critical collections management,” a term that follows from Hannah Turner’s “critical collections histories.”<sup>65</sup> Their scholarship and practice has sought to call attention to the broader political and institutional contexts which have stabilized and normalized the central technologies and practices associated with collections: the catalog, access, and handling, to name a few.<sup>66</sup> Critical collections management asks museum professionals to consider the legacies that have given shape to contemporary ways of behaving and thinking in and about museums. This work intends to join in that conversation and encourage its presence in various professional and professionalizing contexts.

I hope that museum professionals (especially those of you that are emerging and aspiring) will engage the histories, interpretations, and new models associated with critical collections management, bringing them to bear on the development of organizational policies and visions at your own museums, as well as accounting for them in mundane practices and everyday decision-making. I believe in the importance of not only knowing the ins and outs of contemporary standards of professional practice, but also what museums have done in the past (the details, not just impressions or suspicions about the good old days or, more usually, the bad old days). I believe there is extraordinary value in considering why best practices exist, and the ways in which they will change in the future as museums and their contexts continue to change. At the end of each chapter I have included a brief section, “Connecting to Contemporary Museum Concerns,” that highlights what I think are some of the more meaningful and interesting aspects of each chapter, and their relevance to contemporary museum practice. The claims I make and perspectives I advance are born out of my nearly two decades of work in museums as practitioner, as well as an anthropologist interested in museums as cultural institutions.

## Notes

1. The Bureau of Ethnology was established in 1879 and the name was changed to the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1894. I use Bureau of American Ethnology because of the general familiarity with the latter name and acronym (BAE).
2. James Stevenson, “Illustrated Catalogue of the Collections obtained from the Indians of New Mexico and Arizona in 1879,” in *Second Annual Report of the*

- Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution 1880–1881* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1883), 307–422.
3. Ledger book, Volume 009 page 030. EZID: <http://n2t.net/ark:/65665/m327feccc9-1b86-4c78-929e-38e42f89b883>
  4. For the choice of the term “itinerary” over the more commonly used “biography” on the basis that itinerary offers a more explicit reference to object mobility, see Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie, “Making Things Out of Objects That Move,” in *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice*, eds. Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2015), 3–20.
  5. See Catherine A. Nichols, “A Century of Circulation: The Return of the Smithsonian Institution’s Duplicate Anthropological Specimens,” *Museum Anthropology* 37, no. 2 (2014): 144–59.
  6. For an analysis of repatriation efforts in the United States, see Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America’s Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
  7. For an overview of anthropological collecting by the Smithsonian in the American Southwest see, Nancy J. Parezo, “The Formation of Ethnographic Collections: The Smithsonian Institution in the American Southwest,” *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 10 (1987): 1–47. For anthropological collecting in the Northwest Coast see, Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1995).
  8. See, e.g., Laura Peers and Alison Brown, eds., *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003); Jennifer Shannon, *Our Lives: Collaboration, Native Voice, and the Making of the National Museum of the American Indian* (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2014); Cara Krmpotich and Laura Peers, *This Is Our Life: Haida Material Heritage and Changing Museum Practice* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014); Neal Matherne and Hannah Quaintance, “Meaningful Donations and Shared Governance: Growing the Philippine Heritage Collection through Co-Curation at the Field Museum,” *Museum Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2019): 14–27; Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Charlotte: UNC Press, 2012); Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips, eds., *Museum Transformations: Decolonization and Democratization* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2020).
  9. See, e.g., Rodney Harrison, Sarah Byrne, and Anne Clarke, eds., *Reassembling the Collection: Ethnographic Museum and Indigenous Agency* (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2013); Heidi Bohaker, Alan Ojig Corbiere, and Ruth B. Phillips, “Wampum Unites Us: Digital Access, Interdisciplinarity and Indigenous Knowledge—Situating the GRASAC Knowledge Sharing Database,” in *Museum as Process: Translating Local and Global Knowledges*, ed. Raymond A. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 2015), 44–66; Graeme Were, “Digital Heritage, Knowledge Networks, and Source Communities: Understanding Digital Objects in a Melanesian Society,” *Museum Anthropology* 37, no. 2

- (2014): 133–43; Jane Anderson, “Options for the Future Protection of GRT-KTCES: The Traditional Knowledge License and Labels Initiative,” *Journal of the World Intellectual Property Organization* 4, no. 1 (2012): 73–82; Catherine A. Nichols and Christopher Lowman, “A Common Thread: Recognizing the Contributions of the Summer Institute in Museum Anthropology to Graduate Training with Anthropological Museum Collections,” *Museum Anthropology* 41, no. 1 (2018): 5–12.
10. Krmpotich and Peers, *This Is Our Life*, 153.
  11. Martha Graham and Nell Murphy, “NAGPRA at 20: Museum Collections and Reconnections,” *Museum Anthropology* 33, no. 2 (2010): 105–24.
  12. Margaret M. Bruchac, “Broken Chains of Custody: Possessing, Dispossessing, and Repossessing Lost Wampum Belts,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 162, no. 1 (March 2018): 56–105.
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  14. Tony Bennett, “Civic Laboratories: Museums, Cultural Objecthood and the Governance of the Social,” *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 523.
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  16. Chris Gosden, Frances Larson, with Alison Petch. *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 1884–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52.
  17. Frances Larson, Alison Petch, and David Zeitlyn, “Social Networks and the Creation of the Pitt Rivers Museum,” *Journal of Material Culture* 12, no. 3 (2007): 211–39.
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51. *Ibid.*, 44.
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