

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

Navigating Museum Currents and Futures: Lessons From Oceania

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**Center for the Future
of Museums**

ABOUT THIS PAPER

A future in which museums in Oceania and the people working within them are still here modeling ways in which museums can expand their horizons while learning from our collective past.

ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT

This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM's Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums' evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today*](#).

In March of 1993, the late Tongan anthropologist and novelist Epeli Hau'ofa made his first ever trip to the island of Hawai'i. He was invited to give a lecture at the annual meeting of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania, which was held in Kailua-Kona, followed by a speech at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. Hau'ofa prepared his lecture in advance before his arrival in the islands. His speech, on the other hand, still needed to be written. The drive from Kona to Hilo along the island's southern route became Hau'ofa's "road to Damascus," where he envisioned Oceania anew:

I saw such scenes of grandeur as I had not seen before: the eerie blackness of regions covered by recent volcanic eruptions; the remote majesty of Mauna Loa, long and smooth, the world's largest volcano; the awesome craters of Kilauea threatening to erupt at any moment; and the lava flow on the coast not far away. Under the aegis of Pele, before my very eyes, the Big Island was growing, rising from the depths of a mighty sea. *The world of Oceania is not small; it is huge and growing bigger every day* (emphasis added, Hau'ofa 2008, 30).



Above: A view of Hawai'i's volcanic southern landscape, with Mauna Loa's gradual slopes in the background, ca. 2022. Image by the author.

The speech Hau'ofa gave in Hilo became "Our Sea of Islands," one of his most influential essays. Decades later, his words are still taught in university classrooms globally as a foundational text in the field of Pacific studies. The essay offers an empowered and future-oriented view of Oceania—also known as the Pacific, Moana, Wansolwara, and other names, depending on whom and where you ask—that continues

to inspire generations of Pacific Islander students and their allies. Simultaneously, “Our Sea of Islands” and other works by Hau’ofa have inspired transformations in museological practice across our region and beyond to be more responsive to and conversant with artists, museum professionals, and communities across and beyond Oceania (Jacobs 2024).

I was three years old in 1993 when Hau’ofa drove through the Ka’ū Desert and experienced the grandeur of the lands that I was privileged to be raised on and am genealogically connected to through my maternal lineage. Flash forward to 2024, and I am now a curator working remotely from the island of Hawai’i for the National Museum of the American Indian, specializing in Native Hawaiian history and culture. One of my major projects this year was to bring home Kānepō, a large accretionary lava ball that was loaned to NMAI and transported to Washington, DC, twenty years ago. Following months of planning and meeting with various stakeholders, we celebrated the stone’s return during the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (June 26 – July 1), and conducted ceremonial protocols to bring Kānepō home in a good way. On July 31st, celebrated in Hawai’i as Lā Ho’iho’i Ea (Sovereignty Restoration Day) in commemoration of the return of Hawai’i’s sovereignty following a brief British occupation in 1843, I joined a small group of staff from Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park and members of their Kūpuna (Elders) consultation group to return Kānepō to the lands where the stone was found—the same lands that Hau’ofa witnessed on his drive to Hilo.



Left: Kānepō, an accretionary lava ball that was sent to the National Museum of the American Indian in 2004 to serve as its western cardinal marker. This image was taken a few weeks after the stone was returned to the island of Hawai’i by Kekuhi H. Kanahale and is shared with permission from the Kūpuna consultation group of Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park.




CURRENTS

Kānepō's return to Hawai'i is just one of many examples of how Pacific Islanders and their allies have intervened in museums, galleries, and archives over the decades. Much of this work has taken place in the wake of watershed exhibitions like *Te Maori*, which first opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York forty years ago. *Te Maori* was the first international exhibition to showcase Māori *taonga* (cultural treasures) as fine art in the United States and Aotearoa New Zealand. It was also an early model of "consultation and shared decision-making between indigenous communities and museums" (Nuku 2021, 34). Today, *Te Maori's* legacy endures, as consultation and collaboration have become cornerstones of contemporary museum practice. As artists, scholars, curators, educators, collections managers, repatriation specialists, culture bearers, and community members, we—Pacific Islanders and their allies—have built on the foundation that *Te Maori* and other significant shows and events have created by improving the care of (as well as access to) ancestral belongings, pushing for exhibitions that showcase the vibrancy and diversity of living island cultures and creative expressions, and advocating for resources and spaces for contemporary Pacific art to thrive. We have made great strides to transform museums, and we have only just begun.

The navigational theme for this essay also harkens back to other histories of museums and their relationship to Pacific peoples, namely as repositories and partners in revitalizing long- and short-distance voyaging traditions across the region (Finney 2003). I briefly touched on this topic in a previous essay I wrote while interning at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science and conducting research on its Oceanic collection (Kapuni-Reynolds 2018). Whether it is through organizing canoe carving workshops, hosting collections access visits to navigators and canoe builders, digitizing canoes to make them more accessible to audiences abroad, or creating new wa'a (canoes) that become ambassadors of culture, museums are imbricated in the revitalization of traditional seafaring and other cultural practices. A famous example of these long-standing partnerships is the work of the Polynesian Voyaging Society via the Hōkūle'a, a wa'a kaulua (double-hulled voyaging canoe) built in the 1970s that has circumnavigated the world and is currently circumnavigating the Pacific. Along their many voyages, museums have served as sites where Hōkūle'a has docked and conducted cultural protocols.

Although Pacific Islanders have sailed the waves of change in the museum world, those same waters, like any oceanic journey, can be turbulent. Indigenous museum professionals continue to face hostile (at times, racist) work environments that do not adequately provide the resources they need to do their jobs. Professional development opportunities continue to elude Pacific Islander museum professionals living in more




remote parts of the Pacific. Collaborations that bring communities into museum spaces are not always as successful as institutions and the museum literature sometimes pretend them to be. Although the future remains unpredictable, we can prepare for it by learning from the past, taking note of the successes and failures of present times, supporting emerging museum professionals, and planning for long-term institutional transformation. What might be a plausible future for museums in Oceania, Oceanic collections, and Pacific Islanders working in museums? Here are three lessons to help us imagine that future—guiding stars, if you will—as we navigate our collective museum wa'a (canoe) towards the future we desire.

1. WE STILL WANT OUR STUFF BACK.


Although a considerable number of materials and ancestors have been returned to Pacific nations over the last few decades through various repatriation efforts, calls for the return of cultural belongings and ancestors to their source communities will continue. This work is necessary to ensure that ancestors can rest in dignity, and objects that are integral to community wellbeing and knowledge transmission can return to where they belong. As an example, Native Hawaiians have actively organized to repatriate ancestors, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony ever since the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990 in the United States. Unfortunately, thirty-plus years later, there remain institutions nationally that have yet to comply with the law. Recent public scrutiny over this issue has resulted in these institutions moving to correct these past wrongs. A recent victory that illustrates this ongoing work is the repatriation of 335 Hawaiian items from the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley.

Internationally, calls for repatriation will continue to increase as museums in former colonial powers reckon with their colonial past, and as nations and source communities demand for their ancestors and cultural belongings to be returned. Germany has been quite proactive in this regard, having set guidelines for repatriating colonial-era artifacts, worked with Pacific repatriation specialists to return human remains to their respective homelands, and created opportunities for Pacific Islanders to work in these institutions and to physically and digitally visit their ancestral collections in order to increase awareness and access (see, for example, the Oceania Digital project by the Übersee-Museum). In 2023, following the aftermath of the Lāhainā wildfires, opinion pieces began to circulate calling for the Ethnological Museum in Berlin to return the wooden image of Kihawahine to the Hawaiian islands, so that she may aid in the efforts to spiritually and culturally restore Lāhainā to its former glory. I hope that Kihawahine, and many other significant cultural objects, can be repatriated in the near future.




Collectively, the return of ancestors and other materials of significance to their home communities represents shifts in museum practice to not only comply with domestic and international law, but to also abide by the “spirit” of the law by establishing ethical frameworks to return collections and ancestors to communities. As an example, the Smithsonian Institution recently adopted a [shared stewardship and ethical returns policy](#) to facilitate this work across its museums. It is still too early to tell whether or not this policy will be effective in the long run, but my hope is that it will result in much-needed conversations and consultations with source communities from the Pacific to determine what needs to return, what can be improved in terms of the care of collections that remain in the Smithsonian, and what new art and objects can be created from the relationships that are forged through these meetings. We are living in unprecedented times, both within and beyond the world of museums. We have to adapt if we are to remain relevant.

2. WE WILL CONTINUE TO DECOLONIZE AND INDIGENIZE MUSEUMS.



The work of institutional transformation is never a done deal, and movements like [museum decolonization](#) and Indigenization will continue to expand and develop. Simply put, museum decolonization refers to a broad range of projects that seek to reckon with the colonial legacy and structure of museums while creating pathways for decolonial practices to emerge and take root. Oftentimes, [Indigenous museum professionals are tasked with decolonizing museums themselves](#), when in reality, this work requires a joint commitment from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and boards. Museum Indigenization, on the other hand, refers to the [efforts of Indigenous peoples](#) to create spaces within museums where Indigenous practices and values are at the forefront. It also refers to efforts by Indigenous nations and communities to form their own museums or cultural centers, built specifically with their communities in mind.

Well-known places in the Pacific that have contributed to the advancement of museological theory and practice in these areas include the [Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa](#), the [Vanuatu Cultural Centre](#), and the [Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre](#). Other less-known places that serve equally vital functions for their immediate communities include [Te Umwanibong](#) in Tarawa, Kiribati, and the [Ka Ipu Makani Cultural Heritage Center](#) in Moloka'i, Hawai'i. There are certainly more Pacific museums and cultural centers doing incredible work than is listed here, but hopefully this listing can be a starting point for those who want to learn more about the contribution of Pacific museums to our global field.




Scholars and professionals will continue to scrutinize whether the ideological end goals of museum decolonization and Indigenization can ultimately be achieved. (Can you truly *decolonize* or *Indigenize* museums, which are inherently colonial structures?) Regardless of these debates over linguistic accuracy, my stance has always been to focus more on the work and relationships forged in the name of “decolonization” or “Indigenization” than on the words themselves. Both terms connote *processes* of change and a commitment to making museums better for the future, generation by generation. You certainly can’t create a decolonized or Indigenized museum overnight—it requires sustained resources and decades of activism and transformation. In the meantime, we can continue creating space for decolonial and Indigenous practices to emerge, listening to Indigenous stakeholders and meeting them halfway, and learning from our successes and mistakes. We can form more Indigenous-led museum training institutes that amplify the work of our colleagues, while establishing net(works) of care to empower Indigenous museum professionals to take on leadership positions.

If ‘Eveli Hau’ofa can envision the expansiveness of Oceania as a form of empowerment for Pacific peoples, we too can envision an empowered view of museums and the people who are invested in them. Indeed, the world of museums is not small and isolated; it grows bigger every day as we form networks and coalitions struggling to transform our institutions into ethical places that truly value inclusivity, cross-cultural understanding and empathy, and human dignity.

3. OUR PASTS WILL ALWAYS BE A PART OF OUR FUTURES.

In Hawai‘i, a phrase that has become ubiquitous with Native Hawaiian conceptions of time is “i ka wā ma mua, ka wā ma hope.” Hawaiian studies scholar Lilikalā Kame‘elehiwa popularized this notion of Hawaiian time through her book, *Native Lands and Foreign Desires* (1992), and explained it thusly:

It is interesting to note that in Hawaiian, the past is referred to as *Ka wā mamua*, or “the time in front or before.” Whereas the future, when thought of at all, is *Ka wā mahope*, or “the time which comes after or behind.” It is as if the Hawaiian stands firmly in the present, with his back to the future, and his eyes fixed upon the past, seeking historical answers for present-day dilemmas. Such an orientation is to the Hawaiian an eminently practical one, for the future is always unknown, where the past is rich in glory and knowledge. It also bestows upon us a natural propensity for the study of history (Kame‘elehiwa 1992, 23).



Translated into the world of museums, this phrase and conception of time reminds us that the past informs the decisions we make for the future of our profession. At times, we are still in the process of learning more about our past as we work to repair historical wrongs. As more museums continue to push the boundaries of what contemporary museum practice looks like, we develop a foundation from which future generations can learn from to further our efforts to make museums into the places we desire them to be. We must look to the past as part of how we conceive of the future.

To end this essay, I want to share the following text from *Ka Wena 'Ula: Oceanic Red* (May 25, 2024 – January 12, 2025), an exhibition curated by Leah Caldeira, Kamalu du Preez, Kapalikū Maile, and Marques Hanalei Marzan at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Kaiwi'ula, O'ahu, Hawai'i. As stated on the exhibition website, *Ka Wena 'Ula* “explores manifestations of red in the landscapes, memory, and created expressions of Oceania,” primarily through historical objects from Bishop Museum's collections and other repositories in the Pacific and Europe (Bishop Museum 2024). More than a presentation of precious artifacts and cultural belongings, the exhibition grappled in its labels and catalog with the colonial legacy of the institution, naming the violences of collecting and museumification practices while simultaneously creating space for Indigenous interpretations and institutional critiques to emerge (Caldeira and Johnston 2024). The exhibit included the following label—a beautifully scripted statement speaking to the resilience and collective willpower of Pacific peoples to reignite ancestral connections and practices and sustain them into the future. We are still here, and we will continue our work in Oceania and abroad to transform museums and related institutions. We have only begun.

MEMORY AS RESILIENCE

The collective memories of Oceania fill our seas. They recall every stone set, every wind-whisper, every step danced, every child born. The voices of our ancestors carry in each word spoken, each prayer made manifest, and in each heart. We reach into the depths of time and through an ocean of relations to renew our ties, generation by generation, despite the past and present intrusions of colonialism, the violence of unethical institutional collecting, and the disjunctures of introduced politics and religion.

Adaptation is not acceptance, and accommodation is not always assent. Our resilience is not only in re-memorizing ourselves to meet the needs of the present, but reinvesting ourselves with the knowledge that our sovereignty has never faded. Our stories fill our mouths and echo as a thunderclap on the night air. As we remember our ancestors from distant pasts, we set the path for the children who will one day picture us as the ancestors of their memories.

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Halena's research interests center around Native Hawaiian history and culture and Pacific museum anthropology. His writings have been published in *Museum Anthropology*, *Pacific Arts*, *The Contemporary Pacific*, *Studies in Arts and Humanities*, and *the Denver Museum of Nature & Science Annals*. His most recent publications include "On language, access and practitioners: beginning a conversation on decolonising and indigenising the care of kapa collections at Bishop Museum" in *Collections Management as Critical Museum Practice* (UCL Press, 2024), and "Native Hawaiians and the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum: Historical Reckoning, Truth-telling, and Healing" in *U.S. Museum Histories and the Politics of Interpretation* (Routledge, 2023). In 2024, Halena received his Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa after defending his dissertation, "Kuʻu Home ʻO Keaukaha: He Lei Moʻolelo No Ka ʻĀina Aloha (My Home, Keaukaha: A Lei Of Stories For Beloved Land)." His concluding chapter traced earlier models of cultural centers in Keaukaha and the surrounding area in order to envision a new cultural center for the community. He dreams of a future where this institution exists and flourishes.





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