Embracing "Community": The Museum Profession at a Social Museology Turn

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Acolhendo a "comunidade": a museologia profissional diante do giro sociomuseológico

In the operational vocabulary of museums, the term "community" has popularised in the last few decades, often perceived as an indispensable notion applied to museum work, policies and professional ethics. In some cases, the term is used as a direct response to the public pressure on institutions to promote social inclusion and foster participation, thus democratising their service to society. In others, "community" is a buzzword without a specific meaning, superficially used in museum communication with no real change in practices. Even though its uses may vary, and its application may be related to different social, cultural or political demands (Crooke, 2010), it is undeniable that the term is invested of a real desire for change within the sector – one that has been pushing museum professionals to learn social museology skills in order to engage with diverse groups and remain relevant to society. This article investigates this social and institutional turn involving the use of "community" – or "communities" in the plural – and its effects in museum practices, politics and ethics. By examining the application of the term in scholarship as well as in international policies and codes of ethics, I will comment on its social impact in situated examples in the United Kingdom and point out the challenges of its use according to some of its critics. Finally, I will argue for the relevance of this notion and what it entails in terms of setting parameters for social action as we commence to envision a new relational ethics for museums.

At least since the emergence of the New Museology movement, and the idea that museums can be democratised through community engagement (de Varine, 1992/1978), professionals were encouraged to reconsider how social groups can transform our understandings of museums' functioning and social role. Either moved by identity agendas (Maure, 1986), or based on a determined territory, preserving "a sense of place" (Davis, 1999), communities have been challenging the established ways of making museums in the light of new social claims and as part of wider liberation movements. Meanwhile, in recent professional responses to these claims, some critics have assigned to the term a strictly "activist" sense, rejecting its use in professional codes and legislation based on an association with a "woke"[2] agenda that supposedly influences museums. Although recognising the misunderstandings from its application in different languages and cultural contexts, and the term's general imprecision when uncontextualized,[3] I will argue that its recurrence in museum vocabulary signals an ongoing transformation with social and professional implications – one that shouldn't be ignored. At the local and national levels, the term "community" associated with "the museum" is present in several laws and public policies, in the different regions of the world. Internationally, it has been used as a key term in UNESCO declarations and ICOM recommendations.[4] For instance, the term

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[2] A term frequently used by right-wing politicians and campaigners to disqualify and dismantle equality, diversity and inclusion policies

[3] A problem that has already been pointed out by several commentators before, including Watson (2007); Crooke (2007); and Brown (2024).

[4] The most recent one being the Resolution on "Museums, Communities and Sustainability" adopted in 2019, in Kyoto.

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"communities" is integrated in relevant ways[5] into the UNESCO *Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society*, from 2015. Furthermore, "the participation of communities" was included in the last revision of the ICOM definition of the term "museum", from 2022, to qualify the museum operation and communication.

The use of the term, however, is not a novelty, nor a short-lived trend. Before the "community" vocabulary could translate into "official" documents and legislation, it was ventilated among the adepts of the New Museology movement in the 1980s, or even before, with the emergence of innovative community and local museums, in the 1970s. In the context of Latin America, these were referred to as "integral museums" or "social museums" after the appearance of the terms during the Round Table of Santiago de Chile, when discussions involved museum experts, leaders and governmental representatives. The term "communities" appeared in the 1972 Declaration of Santiago, associated with museums' service to society, and stimulating "those communities to action" (UNESCO, 1973, p. 199). Based on this affirmation, and the global recognition of the museum as a service to society – notably, with the ICOM museum definition adopted in 1974 [6] – a range of new museum expressions would be internationally associated with the label of the "community museum". Encompassing ecomuseums, local and regional museums, or even some "open-air" and "neighbourhood" museums, this elastic notion refers to constant changing and experimental initiatives, largely based on non-orthodox practices, which challenge the professional limits of a dominant museology. Another relevant example refers to the broad recognition of the "communities" as active heritage creators through the landmark UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, from 2003. Inspired by Japanese and Korean notions of living national treasures that value humans as bearers of traditional knowledge, the Convention introduced a new global heritage paradigm, one that opened new windows for the active involvement of communities in the making of heritage.

In this article, I will reflect on the uses of the "community" notion in selected examples across the UK, examining how the term "community" has migrated from aspirational international policies and codes of ethics to shape new collective practices in museums of different kinds. As debated by other authors, the proliferation of community policies in the UK dates back from the 1990s and 2000s, when the notion of "sustainable, inclusive, cohesive and regenerated communities was a major strategic government approach" (Crooke, 2010, p. 17-18). In a context where the term "community heritage" is commonly used in local policies to classify heritage initiatives that are driven by communities and intertwined with their lived experiences, the community agenda has become essential in museums at every level. Over the last decade, the role of community engagement officer has become a crucial one in museums seeking to build stronger connections and sustained collaborations with communities (Wallen, & Docherty-Hughes, 2022). My claim is that even though motivated by community demands and governmental support to increase participation at all levels of the museum operation, most professionals still struggle with relational skills to work collaboratively with them. Due to a limited awareness on social museology debates and established practices – many of which stem from the Global South – European museums find themselves engaged in a crusade to advance a new collaborative expertise.

In global debates, when discussions around "communities" were more or less secluded to the context of community museums – as marginal initiatives with limited political and economic power –, they didn't seem to raise so much concern from professionals. Today, as the term is used in an international definition and currently informs the revision of ICOM's professional Code of Ethics, the "community" became a focus of contestation and a category of political dispute among some of the members of this organisation. What is at stake here is the power and agency of members of civil society to shape museums and influence the management of cultural heritage. Looking closely into this professional resistance, one can see how the contours of authority and expertise within the sector are also defined by lines of gender, class and race. What

[5] The term appears six times throughout the Recommendation with different complimentary uses spanning from museums social role towards communities in changing societies, to their involvement in museum communications and collaborative processes.

[6] For a comprehensive discussion on the introduction of the phrase "in the service of society" in the ICOM museum definition, see Brulon Soares, & Bonilla-Merchav (2025).

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is being challenged by the use of the term "community" in the self-declaration of many collectives, organisations and social movements are the boundaries that establish the limit of participation and the authority of professionalism. These self-proclaimed "communities", their knowledge and their heritage serve museums to interrogate these very boundaries and, eventually, destabilise them.

Museums nurturing communities: when collaboration involves care work

What was seen, back in the 1980s, as a restricted concept associated with specific types of grassroots museums oriented to local goals, *the community* is today one of the most used terms by museums of all kinds: from the contexts of exhibitions and educational programmes to collections management and bids for funding. The idea that museums serve "communities" by collaborating with them became a useful notion to increase public outreach and foster diversity at all levels. Moreover, it permits institutions to justify public accountability, to demonstrate engagement and to "decolonise" their practices and the interpretation of collections (Brulon Soares, & Bonilla-Merchav, 2025). If in the past this was not a word used to describe the priorities of larger, collections-oriented institutions, it turned into a usual notion in museums' mission statements, strategic plans and internal policies.

At a practical level, museum professionals recur to the term "community" to identify the distinct social groups they will target in their activities and programmes. Nonetheless, the concept has proven to be problematic in denoting a false impression of stable or fixed groups, attached to certain cultural traditions and represented through singular and homogeneous identities. In this sense, through its widespread use, a paradox is preserved: while the discourse on "communities" may encourage greater participation of underrepresented groups, it also makes it harder for some groups and individuals to exercise their self-representation using their own terms and embedding their own heritage and knowledge in a museum setting. As heritage scholars critical to this notion have argued, the artificial and static idea of a "community" reinforces presumed differences and hierarchies based on identity, race and class. It helps to sustain social categories – easily translated into museums' representations – thus ignoring the fact that "representations of reality can have powerful effects on any group under construction" (Waterton, & Smith, 2010, p. 9).

From the perspective of those identified in the community, to engage in collaboration in an institutional setting implicate them in the very structure that continually excludes them: one historically marked by relationships of subjection, appropriation and dispossession (Mbembe, 2017). It entails finding oneself at the very place where domination is programmed to occur, where the social order is inflicted in individuals and collectives, where the monoculture of knowledge – also known as universalism and rationalism – prevents other knowledges from flourishing. It is not possible for any collaboration to be fair for all involved parties without all participants having acknowledged their place regarding the reproduction of museum violence. From a curatorial perspective, this presupposes active listening to multiple voices and the mediation of conflict. It requires an understanding of communities as situated social formations, embedded in the dynamics of contemporary society, and as non-homogeneous groups where conflicting views may coexist. By admitting that there are no symmetric relationships in the idealised "contact-zone",[7] one must concede that people in communities usually must fight harder to achieve agency in the museum – and their voices rarely carry the same weight as those of the curators they are invited to work with.

As discussed elsewhere,[8] the predominant instrumental view on "collaboration" tends to overlook the institutional impact on the groups museums engage with, frequently disregarding their own expertise and knowledge systems, and not properly compensating them for their work. By acknowledging how curatorial work can generate institutional violence, some museums are redesigning their public function and social role to serve communities in more effective and structural ways. As it has been the case of national institutions in the Global South, museums have offered shelter and food for those in need; they have served as vaccination centres during health crisis; they have functioned as safe spaces where different views can find a way to dialogue, and conflict can be moderated to achieve mutual understanding.

Distancing myself from the neoliberal views on care work as part of the wellness industry, criticised by authors such as Raha and van der Drift (2024), I prefer to think of the museum's role toward communities as

[7] For a critical discussion on this notion in museum theory and practice, see Boast (2011).

[8] I have presented an in-depth discussion on "collaboration" and "co-curation" in chapter IV of my book The Anticolonial Museum (Brulon Soares, 2024).

the one of a "clinic of the subject" – borrowing the idea from Frantz Fanon, interpreted by Mbembe –, as locations, animated by speech, where relationships of subjugation and vulnerabilities can be exposed, scrutinised and, eventually, healed.[9] In this sense, care for communities "is about supporting each other's survival, towards flourishing" (Raha, & van der Drift, 2024, p. 20). Thus, it is a mutual relation, one that rejects any form of servitude.

As evidenced by case studies from the UK, community engagement and collaboration have become central to museum practice, frequently prompting institutions to act as centres of care. Even though recent scholarship recognises how the practice of care can be decisive for the future social relevance of museums (Morse, 2021), most sustained examples of care work remain concentrated in grassroots, community-driven organisations. Compelling cases include the Museum of Transology, located in Brighton, England, with its collecting efforts involving an active network of care for trans people, one that is currently being expanded nationwide; and the Glasgow Women's Library (GWL), in Scotland, with a respected history of serving local communities and embedding care in its exhibition projects and educational programmes. In this last example, within the context of the exhibition *Life Support: Forms of Care in Art and Activism*, opened in summer 2021, the GWL explored the politics of care within the art field through a co-curation project having their closest collaborators and communities as a starting point (Gausden et al, 2023, p. 153). Instead of being perceived as isolated initiatives, such actions are informing a new consciousness on museums' social role across the country. For instance, one can observe this sectorial change reflected in the Museums Galleries Scotland aims and strategies (2023-2030), which outline social inclusion, health and wellbeing, "fair work", climate action and collaboration among the priority areas for the sector.

Museums nurture communities when they offer basic support and infrastructure to enable their life experiences and cultural expressions to flourish. Museums' activities and programmes can be catalysts for sustaining collective action and enabling participation in the public sphere. In the context of global crises, museums can serve as hubs for communities of care, as we recently witnessed with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This often requires a shift of focus towards what is essential for the maintenance of life under extreme circumstances where not all lives are equally valued. The urgence of care, then and in more recent times, brings about the question of "the social value of people or bodies – of racialised, feminised, disabled, poor, migrant, trans and/or queer people in particular" (Gausden et al, 2023, p. 162). Oftentimes, "community" refers to collective responses that, in moments of crises, aim to denounce the "unequal redistribution of vulnerabilities" (Mbembe & Sarr, 2019); and when groups seek protection through different forms of connectivity. More and more, in present day, museums are redirecting their priorities in the service of the most vulnerable communities surrounding them. This shift – far from being a universal one – is significantly shaping new forms of expertise: ones that define museum professionals as social workers (as suggested Rússio, 2010, p. 153) and museum work as an active form of care for those in need.

Communities nurturing museums: co-creating a new collective expertise

Despite the fact that the social aspect of museum's collections and overall management has been stressed in recent years, best practice guidance is still dominated by Western museum standards[10] and individual ideals (Krmpotich, & Stevenson, 2024). Inspired by the pledges for the decolonisation of museums as essentially European structures (as denounced by Adotevi, in 1971) and on the notion of a democratising "forum" (Cameron, 1971) fostering new encounters between people, social museology emerged as a reflexive school with the political aim of introducing new subjects and collectives in the making of contemporary museology. Building on the new educational models for citizenship that emerged in the late twentieth century (Primo, 2014), it sees the participation of communities as a crucial element in museums' crusade for social change, social justice and the protection and promotion of human rights.[11] Nonetheless, those defying the

[9] A reflection on this notion discussing the effects of colonialism, including racism and particularly its institutional form can be found in chapter 6 of Mbembe's book A Critique of Black Reason (2017).

[10] I use the term "Westen" here as a general notion referring to knowledge traditions stemming from Europe and marked by traces of modern thinking – such as objectivity, rationality and individualism –, which was globally disseminated through colonialism and continuously reinforced by neoliberal capitalism.

[11] Here, I acknowledge the decolonial critique of the concept of "universal human rights," which exposes its roots in the European historical experience and legal framework. While considering the challenge of global organisations to reconcile

notion of "communities" seeking to protect the supremacy of the professional (along with the hierarchies it entails), still resist the call for greater participation and inclusion in the preservation of heritage and in the making of museums. In this section, I propose to look beyond the antagonism between conflicting views on authority, to reconsider the place and the value of "communities" for the maintenance of museums' social relevance, whilst observing how a collective expertise has been developing aligned with social museology principles.

In July 2020, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford publicly announced its decision to remove all human remains from its permanent galleries. The move followed over a century of Indigenous Peoples' claims against the public display of their ancestors' remains. As a result, 123 items were withdrawn from public view, marking a significant shift in institutional practice and signalling a renewed commitment to centring community voices and addressing their needs. By emphasizing collaborative methodologies in some of its new projects, the museum pledged to engage in meaningful knowledge-sharing processes with Indigenous groups, valuing their epistemologies and belief systems in an unprecedented move at this institution. As a baseline for the Pitt Rivers' decision, it evoked article 4.3 of the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums:

> *Human remains and materials of sacred significance must be displayed in a manner consistent with professional standards and, where known, taking into account the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated. (ICOM Code of Ethics, 2004, quoted from the Pitt Rivers website).*

As a starting point, this process paved the way for a series of collaborative initiatives, including the reinterpretation of collections beyond conventional scientific frameworks and the critical redisplay of selected items. The referred article of the Code of Ethics makes explicit mention to situations in which professional standards must take into consideration the communities' points of view – a notion that has been expanded in more recent national and international guidelines. The UK Museums Association guide for *Supporting Decolonisation in Museums* establishes as a core principle to build "meaningful and equitable relationships with those who are underrepresented and misrepresented within museums," while valuing "all forms of knowledge and expertise" (MA, 2021, Decolonising principles 3 and 4). Developed in collaboration with UK professionals contributing to change in the sector, this document addresses concrete actions to be achieved by institutions and their staff members, including establishing parameters for working with communities.

In similar ways to the Pitt Rivers, other museums across the UK have been working with communities to restore some of their longstanding practices: including collections care, documentation, exhibition and their overall governance. The Hunterian, another scientific museum, in Glasgow, since 2021, put forward its "Curating Discomfort" project developed "to address historic power imbalances within the museum and across all our activities."[12] What began as a series of exhibition interventions and provocations based on co-curation with community members developed into a broader revision of the museum's governance model. In June 2025, aiming to achieve organisational change, the Hunterian team started a series of workshops involving diverse members of partner communities to develop its new Strategy as a self-defined "ethical museum". According to its Head of Strategy, Development and Implementation, Zandra Yeaman, when interviewed about her role as "curator of discomfort":

> *Often museums focus on community engagement projects without giving up any of their authority. They produce an exhibition and that's it. I saw this role as a beginning to open up the uncomfortable conversations that need to happen internally to challenge this authority and practice. (Yeaman, 2021)*

Examples of new projects based on co-creation and the sharing of authority have been populating museums in Europe and beyond, from ethnographic institutions to science museums and art galleries.

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human rights agendas with the growing expectation to localise and decolonise their approaches (Spence, 2021), I claim that the use of the term by some collectives who have been violated of their rights oftentimes serves to disrupt inequalities and shift power to communities.

[12] A detailed description of its current activities can be found at The Hunterian website. "Curating Discomfort". https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/about/changing-museum/curating-discomfort/#tab=tab-2. [Accessed 23 July 2025].

Nurturing unprecedented connections with civil society, these projects entangle new participants in the museum expertise, whilst provoking curators to develop innovative collaborative methodologies. Based on the practice of continuous dialogue and active listening, some of them are going beyond isolated initiatives or brief interventions to foster structural, organisational change permeating the museum with new agencies and knowledge. However, in order to put forward a new collaborative expertise and ethical principles to guide co-creation, museums must, first and foremost, dismantle the colonial paradigms that inform their relationships with communities to redistribute authority through participatory decision-making processes. In other words, the museological change envisioned by some curators and the communities they work with presupposes unlearning the institutional models embedded in coloniality and aligned with neoliberal ideologies that prioritise individualised agency (Lugones, 2003), to open new spaces for collective agency.

Such a complex process – identified by some as "decolonisation" – ultimately involves learning from the communities' alternative ways to preserve and transmit heritage beyond the *Western* models. Even though examples of museums nurtured by community work may seem abundant today – especially if compared to a few years back –, sectorial change can only be effective through a revision of the regimes of knowledge (and power) that globally determine what is going to be valued and passed on as cultural heritage. The contemporary frameworks through which heritage is valued and classified pose challenges that are simultaneously practical and epistemological. The preservation of heritage in collaboration with the concerned communities, either in museum collections or in the dynamics of intangible cultural heritage, involves the restoration of the knowledge regimes that inform the "authorised discourse" structured by ways of knowing and being defined amidst the European Enlightenment.

By working with communities and valuing collective agency, as an alternative to the work of the individual curator, museums respond more effectively to the social pressures of the present, as democratic and inclusive institutions. In this sense, one can speculate (or even hope) that the more frequent use of the term "communities" in policies and codes of ethics, and the proliferation of projects based on co-creation in museums around the globe are a sign of a change in progress: the configuration of a new collective expertise set out to transform the museum profession. However, for a new museum expertise to emerge, we need to change our attitude toward knowledge and heritage to include the bodies and epistemologies museums have worked to exterminate. To speak of "communities", to invite historically excluded groups in the making of heritage is perhaps only the starting point of a much longer process. We are now planting the seeds of a new kind of museum, one that might flourish as we continue to move towards a collective future.

Community Sovereignty: The Political Uses of Social Museology

As suggested Mbembe (2017, p. 170), the question of people's self-determination may have moved to new locations, but it remains a fundamental part of the processes of emancipation – which in many ways involve museums. It is no coincidence that the term "community" popularised in museum literature and professional guidelines after the emergence of social movements for the liberation of historically subjugated groups (de Varine, 2005). To reconsider the cultural expressions of those who have either been dispossessed or overlooked in the context of museums became part of the exercise of museologists proposing reparative practices identified as "social museology". This has been a defining feature of scholarship within the interdisciplinary field of social museology, understood here as both a critical framework for examining inequalities within the broad sector of museums and a set of reparative practices aimed at addressing them.

This feature was particularly observed in Latin America, recognised as a fertile region for the flourishing of such initiatives since the 1960s and 1970s when new museum practices were being conceived and locally applied under the label of "social museums". More recently, community museums associated with the emerging discourse of social museology became widely known as popular tools for the democratisation of culture and memory (Abreu, & Chagas, 2007). What is at stake in most of these "community museums" are the right and the authority of the involved groups to govern themselves beyond the tutelage of the state, while protecting them from the unequal dynamics of a rapid-changing neoliberal market. In the past, this vocabulary was used by state agents to extend the role of the state, relegating governing functions to communities themselves – in the name of "local development"[13] – a general sense that was adopted in

[13] This was part of the rhetorics of New Museology and the conception of ecomuseums, as clearly stated by Hugues de Varine (1978/92) in his initial writings on the topic.

international documents, such as the aforementioned Declaration of Santiago. A similar process occurred in the UK, when community policies in the 1990s were developed according to a top-down approach, shaped by government priorities (Crooke, 2010, p. 18). However, I argue that in more recent developments, those we refer to as "communities" are appropriating this label as a means of asserting self-governance.

Building on studies of museums' historical role in the governance of populations (Bennett et al, 2017; Bennett, 1995), I propose to expand the notion of sovereignty beyond the constitution of sovereign museums and collections to the realm of community organisations. Those I refer to as "sovereign museums" are institutions whose collections have historically operated – and in some instances continue to operate – as instruments of sovereign power, particularly through the representational regimes they enact. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of sovereignty[14] as a mode of power that is exercised through visibility, classification, and control, these museums have functioned as sites where authority is exerted through the ordering and exhibition of *universal* knowledge. Moreover, as Mbembe (2019) suggests in his theorisation of necropolitics, such institutions may also be implicated in the symbolic and material governance over life and death: notably in cases where human remains, colonial objects, or representations of subjugated peoples are appropriated and displayed. In this light, sovereign museums are not merely repositories of cultural heritage but active agents in the production and maintenance of political subjectivities, reinforcing hierarchies that reflect broader structures of domination. Despite the clear differentiation introduced by Foucault between sovereign power and his notion of "governmentality", other authors will argue that the emergence of the latter might not depend upon the devitalisation of sovereignty per se (see, for instance, Butler 2006). I agree with these authors by seeing sovereign power as a surviving anachronis [15] reenacted by the modern/colonial museum, in its many contemporary expressions.

By applying the notion of sovereignty to the context of communities reclaiming agency in the museum, I propose to name *community sovereignty* a form of self-governance that entails conquering citizenship, as a modality of counterpower that interrogates the representations of sovereign museums. Eventually, it entails making use of the museum for this purpose, through the self-representation and political determination of subjugated groups. Community sovereignty highlights the creative ways by which the concept of "community" may serve as a crucial tool for some collectives to organise themselves as intelligible entities, enabling them to take action in the public sphere. It is empowerment through collective agency; it is counterviolence, with an agenda of healing, as proposed in the project of Fanon's "clinic". It involves finding alternative ways to build representation and resistance within the authorised regimes. In this sense, community museums and archives defy the governmental criteria of visibility by introducing "a new surface of appearance" (Azoulay, 2013, p. 548) for those rendered invisible. Within the museum context, core activities – of collecting, documenting, conserving, and exhibiting – are repurposed as reparative tools for the liberation of the subjugated and for their emancipation.

Not always perceived as a deliberate attempt to take power, or to exert sovereignty within the model of state institutions, the exercise of sovereignty among community members usually starts with ways to govern themselves, to establish a sense of *living together* that is both affective and political: because it entails the configuration of a "political imagination", one that, according to Azoulay (2012, p. 6), is "common to many and frequently tied to the existence of commons," and that is not always attached to the one promoted by the state. Facing the lack of governmental support to preserve life and to represent their heritage, communities are organised to protect their members and foster a political imagination of their own, one that will allow them to move towards an alternative system, or to rethink their relationship with the body politic. This form of self-governing shaped by the imagination of "community", challenges the rules that define citizenship and provokes a reflection on the political limits of heritage-making. But contrary to suggesting that

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[14] Foucault argues that the modern state used to be vitalised by sovereign power – sovereignty being understood as providing legitimacy for the rule of law. But as sovereignty, in its traditional sense, started to lose its credibility and function, governmentality has emerged as a form of power typical of late modernity. As theorised by Foucault, in the 1970s, governmentality is the way by which political power regulates populations and goods; and according to him it has become the main way state power is exercised or "vitalised" (Foucault, 1997).

[15] Butler (2006) suggests that even though sovereignty no longer operates to support or vitalise the state in contemporary societies, sovereign power may still emerge as a "reanimated anachronism" within a given political field.

community sovereignty is a negation of the state or a refusal to participate in public life, I want to emphasise this form of collective agency as a powerful instrument for grassroots groups to reclaim their rights within the "official" regimes. By exerting community sovereignty, these groups intend to disrupt power positions and dismantle social hierarchies disputing their own place in the established system to be recognised and represented, in their multitude, within the legitimate frameworks of the state.

Community sovereignty is a form of collective power that seeks reparation by denouncing and dismantling power structures based on exclusion and death. It is power at the service of the living. In this sense, it involves all the known and unknown forms of countermuseologies that are continuously challenging our understanding of museums as places in the service of the dead – or serving those who inherited their power. Thus, one could define social museology as a disciplinary branch – and a form of museum activism – concerned with the political uses of the museum by the people historically deprived from their right to memory: a human right that in most societies are not extended to all. By exercising community sovereignty, communities that claim museums as their own seek to subvert our understanding of the very institutions that have shaped our imagination of citizenship. By reimagining museums as collective instruments for healing and repair, social museology invites all of us – perpetrators, victims, and accomplices – to restore our connections with one another through a renewed relational ethics.

Towards a Relational Ethics?

The fact that museums can be used as devices for different social groups to build their own connection with the past and imagine shared futures seems to threaten the more conservative ideas on what constitutes, for some, the museum profession. Even though a shift towards more inclusive practices and collaborative processes can be observed in various parts of the world, resistance to structural change at the international level remains evident within the sector. In the recent debates concerning the revision of ICOM's Code of Ethics for Museums,[16] the "community" vocabulary has been challenged, being perceived as an attempt to diminish professional authority. Among the anticipated changes, the revised Code opted for putting an emphasis on the "people" who work in and with museums as the "most important factor for achieving purpose." [17] Nonetheless, a controversy was raised regarding the primary principle on museum's social role, and its commitment to sustained and ethical work with "communities". Even though a majority of members prioritises the role museums play in constructing meaningful relationships with society, there is still a general misunderstanding on the ways by which this approach implicates the profession.

This article sought to approach an ongoing transformation in museum practice and expertise. As I have demonstrated, this change is largely informed by sectorial policies, guides and codes of ethics applicable nationally or internationally. By analysing the indicators of this change in museum projects and policies, I suggest conceiving of it as part of a sociomuseological turn: one that has the potential to bring to the fore, within major institutions in the Global North, knowledge and skills emerging from the Global South. The influence of Latin American museology in Europe, and particularly the UK, remains difficult to trace, largely due to the limited recognition of knowledge production from the region in academia and in most training programmes. Nevertheless, within the context of global organisations and their regulatory frameworks, the adoption of recommendations and specialised vocabulary influenced by case studies and concepts from that region suggests the emergence of a global movement to revitalise museums. This movement is grounded on ideas that have circulated for much longer, but which have been mostly overlooked by European institutions.

As underline Moutinho and Primo (2025, p. 75), some of the fundamental concerns of social museology have been integrated in key documents with global standards for the profession, thanks to the contributions of museum professionals, educators, activists and policy makers – many of them coming from the non-English speaking Global South. Among these documents, the authors refer to the Declaration of Québec, produced during the I Workshop for Ecomuseums and New Museology, in 1984; the aforementioned UNESCO *Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums* […], from 2015; and the new

[16] The decision for revising its existing Code of Ethics was taken in September 2019. Since then, and particularly between 2022 and 2025, a revision group has been in charge of consulting on the ICOM membership through multiple rounds of open surveys. A revised version of the Code will be presented at the end of 2025, to be voted on in an Annual Assembly of ICOM, in June 2026.

[17] See the consolidated report that informed the new proposed outline for the Code of Ethics in Pantalony (2022).

museum definition adopted by ICOM in 2022. To this list we could add the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, adopted in 2004, and currently under revision considering views from all the regions of the world. Some of the ideas presented in these documents reflect a transition that lies at the very heart of social museology: shifting away from a museum defined by accumulation (ibid, p. 73) – of goods, inheritances and collections, whether acquired or stolen – towards a museum grounded on practices of sharing.

The recurrent use of the term "community" in institutional documents and professional guidelines, even though with different meanings and nuanced interpretations, indicate a global consensus on the fact that museums need to continue the process of opening to societies in more radical and meaningful ways – and that new standards for the profession must follow this shift. In this conclusive section, I argue that the museum profession faces itself in a sociomuseological turning point: one that requires the transformation of the existing professional standards aiming to maintain (and renew) museums' relevance to society. Accordingly, debates around renewed ethical principles should not descend into power struggles or the mobilisation of political rhetoric aimed at discrediting dissenting voices. Rather, to engage in these discussions openly and courageously – to address power dynamics and inequalities in a constructive and respectful manner – requires a sectorial commitment to a new relational ethics for museums. Based on the reflections raised in this article, I would like to highlight some of the core areas that inform this relational approach to museum ethics, embedded in the principles and praxis of social museology:

(1) *Caring for communities:* an ethics of care entails placing people first in museum's purpose and mission, based on an understanding that the care for heritage must be integrated to the care for the communities that sustain it and are sustained by it. Care work, in this perspective, includes every museum worker and collaborator, from the museum's maintenance and basic services to its core activities and leadership roles. Care should be embedded in museum work in the context of every partnership and collaboration with members of society, thereby it requires humanising the museum and valuing the place and the labour of communities – those making it and benefiting from this service. From a professional point of view, this means being sensitive to the needs of different groups involved in collaborations, reflecting on the discomfort generated by professional decisions concerning the interpretation of collections, museum exhibitions and overall communication, as well as the educational models employed. It also means raising awareness and being transparent about the violence imposed by the museum history, institutional structure, management model, and eventually in the context of interpersonal relationships during its programmes and activities. Museums should be seen as places where care is addressed not only as a theme, but as a method to guide personal relations and repair wounds. As in the "clinic of the subject", in the museum, curating frictions and conflicts, or welcoming different views on the past, is also a path towards more care-full relations with communities.

(2) *Valuing community agency through a collective expertise:* To collaborate with external partners in short-term projects is not a sufficiently effective modus operandi. Museums are invited to integrate members of society in their decision-making processes and in every activity, by enabling the agency of communities – not through its individual members, but understanding the "community" as a form of collective agency. In this article, when referring to a collective expertise, I have proposed to dismantle the general understanding of curatorial authority – as individualised agency, embedded in social and professional hierarchies – to consider new collective models for museum work. Such models may include alternative forms of governance comprising different agencies with equal power; decentralised leadership with more integration of members of society; or, more specifically, co-curation models where decisions are made collectively and horizontally.

(3) *Redistributing power to address inequalities:* The only way to address social inequalities in order to repair them is by redistributing power and agency within the museum organisation and including its partners. This transformation concerns less *how* we go about the work, and more *whom* we choose to work with. Redistributing power involves curating authority over major decisions, understanding the museum as a crucial institution for implementing heritage justice. It also requires having leaders who are flexible enough to change priorities when society's demands change due to more urgent needs: for instance, amidst environmental and health crisis, or when groups face

> the violation of human rights. But reparation can also be achieved by enabling communities to make use of museums as political devices to exert community sovereignty. This involves supporting Indigenous Peoples' rights for land, and also LGBTQI+ struggle for civil rights and citizenship. Being proactive about human rights and social justice doesn't mean that every museum should behave as activist organisations all the time. But it requires that activism, at a certain level, should be among the range of skills advanced by museum professionals to serve society and contribute to the desired social change.

In the previous sections I sought to move away from a carceral, enclosed interpretation of "community", frequently (and rightfully) criticised by social scientists, to propose a relational approach to the term: therefore, perceiving a "community" in the social practices of those who utilise the term for the purpose of their self-determination and to achieve collective action. Liberating our understanding of "communities" from the stable perception many museum professionals still have is a first step towards the emergence of *relational museologies* based on real efforts of mutual understanding and sharing authority. Furthermore, recognising the complexity of these relations as relations of power, implies seeing a bigger picture of our sector globally, one marked by structural inequalities and limited access to the resources for heritage preservation and transmission. In other words, it involves confronting the historical barriers for collaboration that are still in place, often overlooked due to museums' presupposed neutrality, when they manifest in the form of institutional racism, elitism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia. If, as we have been arguing, the museum profession stands at a turning point, it is up to us – professionals, academics, educators, community members, and beyond – to envision the professional pathways that will shape the sector's future, and to decide on whom we choose to build that future with.

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