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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on curators' frustrations with (what we call) 'the profusion struggle'. Curators express the difficulty of collecting the material culture of everyday life when faced with vast existing collections. They explain that these were assembled, partly, from anxiety to gather up what was anticipated at risk of being lost. Unlimited accumulation, and keeping everything forever, are being called into question, especially through the disposal debate which has gained in intensity over the past three decades. While often with some reluctance, setting limits by slowing collecting or even reducing collections through targeted letting go, or what is variously called 'deaccessioning', 'disposing', and 'refining' collections, are undertaken to facilitate ongoing collecting, amongst other goals. To respond to curatorial interest in strategies for addressing profusion, we draw on ethnographic fieldwork looking predominantly at social history museums in the United Kingdom, to consider whether ideas borrowed from beyond museums might be of use. We explore the possible implications of economic concepts of 'de-growth' – partly by seeing the ways that these ideas are *already* practiced, but also by examining curators' own enthusiasms and reservations. To develop more sustainable collecting practices, we argue that ideas of collections 'growth' might be usefully reframed.

## Introduction

> I would say one of the big reasons we have for not pursuing an active collecting policy as a priority is a very real concern about being able to adequately care for expanding collections.

> I think looking back, we're still dealing with the mass of acquisitions that came in, in the 1970s and 1980s.

> There's a lot of questions about what have we got, do we need to keep it all, what should we be collecting from the last 20 years, if anything, and what should we be collecting from now, if anything?

The quotes above are from social history curators we met between 2016 and 2017 as part of the research on which this article is based. They are just a few quotes from many that show curators hoping to collect more from recent and contemporary everyday life but feeling burdened by the profusion of existing collected objects and the work that these require. Curators' use of adjectives such as 'expanding', 'vast', and 'huge' to describe their collections, and their accompanying sighs and hand-gestures, express their frustration with what we call 'the profusion struggle'. A key function of museums is to act as repositories of cultural memory, gathering up material objects and information to guard against its anticipated loss. As time goes by, the ongoing 'proliferation of heritage' (Macdonald 2013, 137) can lead to a 'crisis of accumulation' (Harrison 2013).

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Moreover, the collections that curators see as especially burdensome were often created as part of mass salvage collecting of lifeways viewed as on the brink of vanishing (Macdonald 2013, 141–144). These efforts of past curators to anticipate loss, however, contribute to a paradoxical situation in which curators today feel limited in their capacity to do likewise.

This situation raises significant questions about the future sustainability of museum collecting, including the ability to continue collecting and to collect within new areas. One response to dealing with this situation is greater selectivity, especially through more tightly defined collecting policies and transferring concepts of 'significance assessment' from cultural heritage identification, management, and preservation to museum collecting (Macdonald and Morgan 2018). Another, rarer, approach – one that is usually only undertaken with great reluctance – is the planned removal of items from collections through what is variously called, with slightly different inflections, 'deaccessioning', 'disposing', and 'refining' collections.[1] While this is not new, this form of organised loss has become increasingly the subject of discussion – and more often undertaken – in recent years (ibid.; Brusius and Singh 2018, 11–13).

The curatorial proposition that more sustainable museum futures might involve some targeted loss is the focus of this article. It has emerged from our ethnographic research for the Heritage Futures project (Harrison et al. 2016) in which we examine what museums collect from recent and contemporary everyday life for the future. While our initial interest was in what is preserved, the question of 'what not to keep' emerged repeatedly in conversations with curators (Macdonald and Morgan 2018a). Some of the curators expressed interest in the idea of disposal or were even engaged in it, while others argued that it is 'too complex' or 'too difficult' to actually do, and may even be morally wrong.

Without entering the debate about whether museums should or should not engage in disposal, here we consider whether ideas borrowed from beyond museums might allow for less negative (and maybe even more positive) ways of thinking about 'loss' from existing collections. Specifically, we look to philosophies of 'de-growth' developed through the work of economic anthropologist Serge Latouche (2009), amongst others (Kallis and March 2015; Kallis 2017). To consider the possible implications of de-growth ideas, our analysis examines the ways these are *already* at play in museums, as well as curatorial enthusiasm and reservation. It should be stressed that we are neither suggesting that museums should or must dispose of things, nor that de-growing is the only or most appropriate approach for addressing the widespread sense of facing an unruly accumulation of the collected and continuing flood of the potentially collectable. Indeed, partly what we explore are what *other* ideas about museum collecting – including ones from museum professionals – might be seen as compatible with de-growth perspectives. To this end, we draw on the work of Steven Lubar (2015, 2017) and Nick Merriman (2008, 2015) to further probe what might be involved in the prospect of de-growth ideas for crafting new heritage futures.

## Museum disposal in the literature

Until recently, disposal was perceived as having 'negative connotations, including suspicion, shock and scepticism' (as one UK Museums Association [2006, 3] survey found), not only by the public but also by curators. While not a new phenomenon (Greene 2006; Weil 1997), discussion of disposal seems to have gathered in intensity from the late-1980s, with notable reports and other literature to be found especially in the United States, Australia, Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom.[2] This literature shows that disposal has been and is often framed through a neoliberal agenda in relation to the economic costs of saving so much – costs, that is, of storage, conservation, cataloguing and so forth (e.g., Jones 2018). Collections that were not on public display came to be regarded as wasteful, expressed particularly forcefully as 'too much unused stuff, draining resources' by a Museums Association President (2002–2004) Jane Glaister (as we have cited elsewhere, see Macdonald and Morgan 2018a, 32). Also using the provocative formulation, the National Museum Directors' Conference produced what in the

UK was a watershed report in 2003: '*Too Much Stuff?*': *Disposal from Museums*. Following various facts and figures to illustrate the vast accumulation of 'unseen' things in national museums, they reached the following conclusion:

> Disposal can be justified where it helps ensure the preservation of collections, makes them more accessible and better used, removes them to a context in which they are better understood or more deeply valued, or releases resources which can be better used elsewhere. (National Museum Directors' Conference 2003, 9)

Austerity politics has prompted further consideration of disposal – a recent UK-based Museums Association report on the implications of funding cuts finding that 'financially-motivated' disposal 'looks set to rise' (Museums Association 2015, 14).

Although disposal remains 'controversial' (National Museum Directors' Conference 2003, 3; Simmons 2015), it is much more openly discussed than when it was previously considered a 'dirty word' (Goldstein 1997; Vecco and Piazzai 2015) 'never to be uttered aloud' (Greene 2006, 7). The UK Museums Association Code of Ethics shows what the Association itself claims to be a major 'cultural shift' (cited in Cross and Wilkinson 2007, 15) in moving from 'a strong presumption against' disposing of anything in the 1977 code; to permitting 'selective disposal' with retention in the public domain, usually by transfer of items to another museum, in the 1987 code; to actively supporting disposal from museum collections through publication of its Disposal Toolkit in 2008. In the further updated 2014 version disposal is considered 'an integral part of responsible collections management' (Museums Association 2014, 6).[3] Yet, despite the greater permission and even encouragement to dispose that the changed ethical codes and policies provide, the available commentary acknowledges that 'few seem to have had the appetite for large-scale curatorial disposal' (Brown 2015). According to the current Museums Association Director, as discussed in a blog on 11 January 2017 (https://www.museumsasso ciation.org/comment/directors-blog), the tendency remains to 'shy away'. These kinds of statement indicate that while disposal is not as unpalatable as it once was, and at a strategic level is encouraged to be embedded in collections management, it is not necessarily undertaken without misgivings or ambivalent feelings, as our ethnographic fieldwork shows.

## Researching profusion

Our interest in disposal is part of our work on the Profusion-theme of the larger Heritage Futures project. This theme looks at the apparent challenge of mass-production and mass-consumption for assembling the future archive. How in the face of there being so many more things produced today – especially as a result of industrialisation and mass-production and then accelerated by post-Fordist production since the 1970s – is it decided what will be kept for future posterity?

We have explored this question in museums tasked with acquiring from the recent past and everyday present, which generally means those with social history collections or departments. Our fieldwork, which takes an ethnographic approach and is primarily based in the UK, involves gathering and reviewing collections policies and documentation; reading professional reports; visiting museums and attending events of museum professionals concerned with collecting; presenting our work in relevant professional forums, including workshops and websites; and interviewing curators; as well as observing and sometimes participating in aspects of their practice. This fieldwork is shaped too by our previous and ongoing fieldwork, some of which has been undertaken in international contexts (primarily European, but also Asian and Australasian). We expand this international perspective through our consideration of the kinds of reports and policies, cited above, generated by international organisations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM). The material that we present in this article, however, draws from our UK-based work; though on the basis of our wider research we maintain that our general arguments have broader relevance.

## Anticipating loss and the 'sheer volume' of collections

In our conversations with curators, disposal has frequently emerged spontaneously as well as through more specific probing. In some cases, this is in relation to disposal projects on which they have worked and at other times through their expressions of distaste at the idea. It has also emerged through a perceived tension that many of these curators recount, namely, between what they describe as the strong duty to collect and a feeling of potential overload resulting from the many things that have already been collected, and the many more possible things that could be acquired. On the one hand, they express concern to gather up what they see as at risk of being lost. In social history collecting this includes ephemeral, mundane, and ordinary items, as well as things associated with marginalised groups or identities. Curators thus operate with a future-oriented sensibility, or as one told us: 'you don't just collect for the moment, you collect for what might be useful to your curators in the future'. To create 'useful' collections, many of these curators express a desire to continue collecting and to do so in new areas, including the material culture of recent and contemporary everyday-life. On the other hand, however, they emphasise just how extraordinarily difficult this task is when faced with already 'vast' holdings, and further possible material and informational overload.

This tension was illustrated during one memorable visit when a curator described the 'sheer volume' of history material acquired by the museum in which he works, and how this posed not only a problem of use of resources but also how it prevented addressing 'imbalances' of geographic coverage, period, and theme due to a lack of storeroom space potentially limiting new collecting. He regarded past collecting to have resulted in repeated material, much of which had not been collected with 'enough information' (or what is often termed 'provenance'). The result was many objects from certain areas and a lack in others – 'gaps' as some called them. As another curator put it during an interview:

> There are so many things when you are doing an exhibition now that you think "I wish we had that from 100 years ago" [...] Actually, it's the throwaway things that you don't have because people don't keep things like that. It's that aspect of thinking "what would be really interesting in that amount of time", just because it's not going to be around any more.

During our visit, the curator spoke of his hope to see 'genuinely curated collections' rather than 'a great volume of material'. Creating such collections, he hoped, would challenge the economistic idea that non-displayed collections are a 'drain on resources' and would instead allow these to be seen as what he called 'potential great material for the future'. Such sentiments are shared by many other curators in our study, who describe wanting to undertake more 'proactive', 'systematic', or 'targeted' collecting. It is within this context, then, that the increased tolerance of disposing – or what has sometimes come to be euphemistically called 'refining' (or, more often in the US, 'reappraising') – collections may be understood to occur.

## Looking for new arguments: de-growing museum collections

Above we have provided a sense of why museums and/or curators might be open to accepting planned loss from collections. By introducing curatorial desire for 'genuinely curated collections', or what others have told us should be 'curatorially led collections review', museum professionals are not proposing that disposal should be undertaken solely or even primarily on the grounds of practical necessity (e.g., lack of space). Rather, disposal is understood to be part of a broader reflexive assessment of the purpose and function of collections, and the philosophies, values, and motivations that inform collecting (cf. Merriman 2015); or 'why you're collecting things', as one curator pithily put it.

One idea that may be of potential use for assessing contemporary museum collecting, when faced with the profusion predicament, is that of 'de-growth'. De-growth thinking is found across a broad field of scholarship and activism that proposes, as Paulson (2017) summarises,

'lifeways motivated by desires other than growth' (see also Paolini 2008; Demaria et al. 2013; Kallis and March 2015; Kallis 2017). The basic point – set out by one of the main de-growth scholars, economic anthropologist Serge Latouche, in his book *Farewell to Growth* (2009) – is a call for radical change in guiding socio-economic logics away from the premise of 'exponential growth' (8) or 'endless accumulation' (16). Instead, he advocates that the global North embrace goals of producing and consuming less, slowing-down, and setting and living within limits. Latouche (2009) stresses that 'de-growth' is not the same as 'negative growth' (8) but, rather, 'doing more, and doing better, with less' (55). While de-growth may be understood to be a kind of utopian thinking, Latouche argues that there are conceptual and practical changes that can be developed and deployed to build a de-growth society. Together, these constitute a 'virtuous circle' 'of eight Rs': 're-evaluate', 'reconceptualize', 'restructure', 'redistribute', 'relocalize', 'reduce', 're-use', and 'recycle' (33). Three of these, he tells us, have a more 'strategic role' to play in actually effecting change: '*Re-evaluation*, because it determines all changes, *reduction*, because it is a condensation of all the practical imperatives of de-growth, and *re-localization*, because it concerns the everyday lives [...] of people' (43–44, author's italics). The others relate to more specific possible actions and initiatives.

Such ideas are beginning to travel to museum scholarship. Museologist François Mairesse (2010) addresses the issue of 'too much stuff' by asking if we should be 'considering "de-growth museums"'. The high-profile 2017 Verbier Art Summit similarly queried whether de-growth might be the answer to the proliferation of 21st century museum buildings (Ruf and Slyce 2017; Siegal 2017). The possible appeal of de-growth for collecting may lie in its emphasis on abandoning the principle of endless accumulation, 'limitless collecting' (Macdonald 2006, 92), 'indefinite expansion' (Merriman 2008) or 'comprehensive collecting' (Merriman 2015). In other words, the de-growth argument gives museums permission to not keep on expanding indefinitely, but to consider halting or reversing growth by 'unencumbering' themselves of objects (Brusius and Singh 2018, 12). Yet what these specific ideas might mean in practice has not been addressed in any sustained way.

One logical direction of de-growth could be slowing collecting down to the point of no longer acquiring anything new. Our research indicates that there is already less being collected than previously. Decisions are also sometimes made to stop collecting in a certain area, or even to 'close' an entire collection to new acquisitions. Indeed, Nick Merriman maintains that there is a 'virtual cessation of collecting in most regional museums' (Merriman 2015, 250). In effect, this is a form of 're-evaluating' even though it tends to be made as a consequence of constraints rather than as part of a more concerted de-growth philosophy. As such, curators in our study tended to express dissatisfaction with it, feeling that it risked hampering their duty to continue collecting in order to ensure a future archive that holds a rich mix of things. A radical de-growth approach of stopping collecting altogether would, then, risk preventing what curators understand to be the core task of museums.

Nevertheless some de-growth ideas are compatible with curatorial ambitions to continue collecting – but to do so without assuming the indefinite expansion of collections. De-growth approaches entail planned loss in order to enable new collecting within sustainable limits. Nick Merriman's (2008) survey of disposal in UK museums, for example, presents disposal as part of a strategy of 'managed growth' (11) rather than allowing 'ever-growing collections' (3). It proposes a 'sustainable' form of 'expansion' (11), which Merriman defines in terms of inter-generational equity – meeting the needs of present generations without compromising those of the future (9–10). The argument for a curb on accumulation as part of a more sustainable practice echoes Latouche's (2009) claim that de-growth is not about 'negative' growth or contraction in itself but is, rather, an ambition to live within identified limits. The argument also responds to the fact that never-ending growth – and fully comprehensive collecting – are simply not possible. What is needed, therefore, are forms of 'collections management' that allow for de-growth without this being seen as a failure of the very raison d'etre of museums.

## De-growth in practice

With its emphasis on radical reassessment, de-growth encourages broad consideration of what new futures for museum collecting may be possible. Here we turn to our ethnographic materials to examine the ways that such ideas are *already* at play in museums. We consider their implications by foregrounding the extent of curatorial enthusiasm and reservation that they arouse.

### *'Re-evaluate': collections as naturalistic entities*

Our research shows curators to be 're-evaluating' or seeing collections in new ways. This includes the prospect of understanding museum objects to be more naturalistic entities, with cycles of life and death.[4] This might imply limited or even no attempts at object preservation. One conservator argued the need to 'consciously define the lifetime' of new acquisitions by 'working out who this is for and, therefore, how are we going to use it', and thus for the extent of conservation required rather than preserving everything as intact as possible for as long as possible. She explained how an object's lifespan could be 'defined' through material and/or interpretive qualities – or what she calls 'self-destructing' items. Beyond material qualities, the conservator also stressed that the value, relevance, and/or meaning of objects may be time-limited and contextual. In her words:

> If we acquire something that is very relevant and pertinent now to the social or the political situation, we need to define the lifetime and say "is it likely to be 200 years hence?" "Is it likely not to be interesting for 20 years and then it will be?"

Such comments indicate a desire to explicitly articulate temporal or interpretive lifespans for objects, with one possible implication being that this may lead to a greater acceptance of their decay and museological lifetime ending. The prospect of seeing collections through more naturalistic frames may encourage 're-evaluating' philosophical positions on materiality (including being more permissive of physical loss from collections) and temporality (including thinking in specific and shorter timeframes than is typical in heritage management and conservation, which tend to operate in, what Högberg et al. 2018 call, 'a continuing, rolling present').

While such ideas hold appeal for some curators, others also recognise the great difficulty of identifying the end of an object's lifetime, given the inherent uncertainty of what might be valued by future generations. Some practitioners call this the 'cautionary principle' or concern that 'today's depot item may well be tomorrow's masterpiece' (Bergevoet, Kok, and de Wit 2006, 29). Procedures and guidelines promising some kind of objective criteria on which to make decisions, including thresholds for quantifying and assessing significance, may help alleviate anxiety by locating agency in abstract systems rather than in individual subjectivity; yet these systems do not seem to entirely resolve the core issue of deciding 'what not to keep' (Macdonald and Morgan 2018).

### *'Redistribute', 're-use', 'recycle'*

De-growth ideas open possibilities for what might be done with objects that have been selected to be removed from collections. This includes 'redistributing', 're-using' and/or 'recycling', and maybe even in some cases 'using up' an object's material, symbolic, or other qualities (DeSilvey 2017). This may mean being more permissive of decay, deterioration, or destruction especially, as Bowell (2018, 158–159) argues, through examples such as the creative repurposing of museum objects into works of art. Here, disposal and even destruction may become acceptable when they lead to new uses, including tangible products but also experiences and relationships (ibid.). Our fieldwork has shown that such ideas are already circulating in museums, and sometimes being used to think through the process of collecting and disposing.

Several museums that we looked at have trialled more innovative methods for disposal by redistributing items into new contexts of use. For example, the Scottish Transport and Industrial Collections Knowledge Network's 'Old Tools, New Uses' project partnered with the 'Tools for Self Reliance' charity to send duplicate sewing machines and tools from Scottish museums to artisan communities in Sierra Leone and Tanzania (http://stickssn.org/old-tools-new-uses-otnu/). These disposed items were refurbished for use in developing local industry, such as the sewing of school uniforms and adult clothing, or the carpentry of beds, windows, and chairs. Another example is a Museum of London review and rationalisation of its social and working history collections, which disposed of just over 5,000 duplicate and surplus objects (Stephens 2015; Mendoza 2017, 45–46). Many of these objects were transferred to accredited museums, yet a key aim was to seek more innovative routes and recipients for disposal. The Museum gave over 100 duplicate objects to the 'Workaid' charity, which again redistributes items (such as tools, sewing machines, and books) to communities for the learning of new skills (Russell n.d.). The museum also gave duplicated traditional tools used in manufacturing (such as carpentry, shoe making, and metal working) to universities for the teaching of students about historic crafts and for use in training this new generation of craftspeople (ibid.).

While these examples sought to return objects to their original use, in new settings, some curators express a curiosity to push strategies of recycling even further by converting disposed objects into reusable raw materials. 'Things that, perhaps, have broken but were made [for example] from really good wood, maybe there's a case of being able to recycle those and re-use them', one mused. Thinking more creatively about recycling and redistributing is perceived by curators involved in such projects to help museums to do specific kinds of work, often that which is social, for example, developing relationships by making new links to the wider community and organisations including charities and academic partnerships. These projects even seem to suggest that thinking in these ways could encourage perspectives where letting go is not considered an ending of an object's lifetime but perhaps a kind of rebirth, afterlife, or 'reincarnation' (Bowell 2018). They might entail, as an assistant on the Museum of London project put it, 'looking at an item beyond its past as a museum object, and considering its use as a working object' (Russell n.d.).

### 'Reduce': going smaller by 'doing more, and doing better, with less'

Recycling and re-using unwanted objects is sometimes spoken about in ways that indicate curatorial ambitions to achieve, what Latouche (2009, 55) calls, 'doing more, and doing better, with less'. Some curators argued that doing what they called 'getting rid' of 'superfluous' or 'duplicate' items allowed them to acquire new objects, or helped them to do new things. This might include freeing up storage space, improving collections care and knowledge, and/or increasing public access to objects, for example, by transferring items to museums where they can be better displayed.

Often this is spoken about in terms of 'releasing the potential' of collections.[5] One curator, working on a 'review and rationalisation' project, explained:

> This isn't a disposal project, it's actually the collections that are left behind. It's as much about them as what we're disposing. It's what we're keeping, we're doing it for those objects, really, as much as anything and so that is, for us as a museum, a very important outcome. That what we're left with is a refined collection. We want to be able to use it. It has research academic potential that we can start to release because we can manage it better.

'Releasing the potential' of collections might specifically mean, she expanded, 'better documentation', including researching the provenance and use of objects (especially when this had been lost, or not acquired in the first place), leading to more catalogue records in the museum database. A 'refined collection', in this sense, could be one with fewer objects overall, but about which much more is ultimately known: or having 'very informed knowledge about what we have left behind, as much as what we've disposed of', as the curator put it.

Taking this strategy to the extreme, it is sometimes proposed that when faced with proliferating material collections museums should focus on only acquiring information not objects, or on keeping digital photographic and informational records rather than the real thing. Such arguments are long-standing (e.g., Washburn 1984), yet curators we have met express reluctance at these ideas. Not only do they see the digital or other information formats as unable to capture the tangible and multi-sensory characteristics of 'the real thing', they also worry about the possible failure of future digital systems.

### 'Re-localise': connecting communities with collections

De-growth strategies of 're-localising' are also evident in museums. For Latouche (2009, 37) this means meeting 'local needs' by 'producing on a local basis'. Crucially, he argues that 'relocalization is not just an economic issue' but that 'all economic, political and cultural decisions that can be made at the local level must be made at that level' (38).

Within museums a widespread emphasis on more participatory formats (Simon 2010; McSweeney and Kavanagh 2016), including co-collecting (Meijer-van Mensch and Tietmeyer 2013), has developed over the last decade in particular. Questions have been raised in professional debate, reports, and practice over whether similar strategies could be used to help with decisions for managing collections overload. For example, an exhibition entitled *Disposal*, in 2009, at University College London asked audience members to vote on which objects should be kept from a large-scale review of the University's museum collections (Das, Dunn, and Passmore 2011). Similarly, a recent online conversation between Jenny Durrant, an academic researcher, and Michael Terwey, head of collections and exhibitions at the National Science and Media Museum, (https://www.museumsas sociation.org/comment/02102017-the-conversation) asked about the possibility for greater public involvement in disposal decisions. It opened with the provocation:

> While many museums focus their activities around public participation, the process of curatorial disposal is hidden behind closed doors. As a profession, we've become more accepting that disposal needs to happen for a wide variety of reasons, and it is a focus of many training sessions and conferences. Disposal could become a type of public co-curation, but we seem reluctant to talk about it with our stakeholders or publics, let alone involve them in the process. Perhaps the first step to involving the public is to understand why we are so reluctant to do so.

This discussion flagged various 'reluctances' including the perceived risk of institutional or professional reputational damage, or 'embarrassment' that the public would potentially see museums failing to 'collect sustainably, to exercise rigorous curatorial judgment or to care properly for collections'. Such concerns are not unfounded given the many cases of public outcry over deaccession, including recent high-profile criticism of specific cases of disposal (e.g. Steel 2017). The conversation also suggested that reluctance could stem from 'anxiety' around how museum professionals and the public see collections; in the former, Terwey argued, 'as resources to be used', and in the latter 'as "treasures" to be valued for their status'.

### Discussion: crafting new heritage futures

Our research shows that ideas similar to those in the de-growth literatures are already circulating in museums. While not usually part of a more fully developed philosophy, these ideas are considered by curators to provide potentially productive openings for coping with large collections and developing more sustainable collecting practices: partly, by letting go of some things to continue collecting and in new areas. Yet, while holding promise, we have also seen curatorial reservation about fully adopting these de-growth strategies.

Here, we step back from our direct ethnographic encounters to look at compatible arguments made by two scholars with long experience of working in museums. Steven Lubar was a curator at the Smithsonian for over twenty years, and Nick Merriman has worked in museums in the UK – including the Museum of London and Manchester Museum – for more than three decades. While neither uses the language of 'de-growth', both address in concerted ways what they see as problematic views of museums as places of permanent keeping and ever expanding acquisition.

Lubar draws on museum history to discuss past and present modes of curating and collecting. Taking examples from the Smithsonian's history, he critiques the idea of 'collecting as a good in its own right' (Lubar 2015, 96), and with examples from the Jenks Museum (Lubar 2017), which was disbanded in 1945, he introduces the notion that collections are more transient than is commonly recognised. The 'idea that museum collections ought to be permanent' is further critically interrogated in a co-authored article to conclude that this 'is relatively recent' (Lubar et al. 2017, 2). The temporal-cultural sensibility of collections as static and enduring emerged only in the nineteenth-century Western modern museum. Pre-modern collections, by contrast, were more transient, it being common for collections to travel, be dispersed, broken up, or even disbanded altogether. A 'modern obsession with permanence' (4) developed alongside widespread social change, with museums being enrolled in reformist agendas, deploying classificatory systems to canonise distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture. These distinctions rested on specific connoisseurial values and tastes being universally and permanently applied. Thus, as value-exemplars, 'the act of accessioning a particular object to a permanent collection became absolutely constitutive of the museum's ontology' (5). This account, which is orientated towards an argument for the resuscitation of more 'flexible' concepts of collections, begins to highlight how it is not only the material configurations of collections that are open to change through de-growth but their interpretation and value. This includes the possibility of collections disappearing, the study of which is called 'museum taphonomy', after Fowler and Fowler (1996) (see also Ouzman 2006). Lubar also proposes that while 'objects are important to museums', 'they need to be the right objects, collected thoughtfully, documented thoroughly – and not too many' (Lubar 2017, 19). To address what he considers a 'common problem' of 'over-collecting' (18), he argues for tighter rationales by considering how objects will be used for education, exhibitions, and research to benefit the wider public (28–37). Within such frameworks, 'pruning' collections by 'deaccessioning' objects that are no longer useful becomes an 'ethical duty' (142).

Like Lubar, Merriman highlights the historical development of 'the notion …that museum collections should generally be retained in their entirety for posterity' (Merriman 2008, 11), similarly locating this in modern classificatory and stabilising practices. He too calls for more considered practices of collections management (Merriman 2008, 2015). He also puts disposal more centrally within this and does so on the basis of a somewhat different set of ideas, which lead to some distinctive proposed strategies. Looking to the critical museology and anthropology of memory literatures, Merriman argues that these have shifted understandings of museums from being repositories for material things that represent an objective record, or collective memory, to understandings that consider collections to be 'partial, historically contingent assemblages' (Merriman 2008, 3). Rather than expressing 'a single universal truth' (13), as the idea of 'comprehensive recording' assumes (Merriman 2015, 253), collections are acknowledged to reflect changing social and political contexts, and different class, gender, ethnic, or other identities (including the more individualised). Accepting that collecting is inevitably interpretive means abandoning the ambitions of 'comprehensive collecting and its notions of encyclopaedic coverage' (Merriman 2015, 253). To do so does not, however, 'mean that collecting is serendipitous and subjective' (Merriman 2015, 253) – as some of the curators in our research fear ('who are we to say what future generations might want!'). What is needed, rather, is to give fuller recognition to the interpretive nature of collecting and on this basis to develop a new 'scientific' approach (Merriman 2015). By scientific he does not mean a method for seeking 'objectivity' – which would be impossible – but, rather, a practice that is 'rigorous, consciously structured and thoroughly contextualised' (Merriman 2015, 256).

Taking a lead from post-colonial critique in anthropology, he argues that we need to see collecting not as about providing 'coverage of the past' but as 'a form of interpretation, which tells us something about the present' (Merriman 2015, 255). If we do so, 'the process of collecting [becomes] highly significant' (ibid.), meaning that attention needs to be given to the relationships – as between museums and the communities from which objects are collected – entailed. This more 'self-reflexive' approach to collecting would, therefore, also be 'relational' in the sense, developed by Chris Gosden and colleagues (2007) on whose work Merriman (2015) draws, of foregrounding the relationships in which the museum is enmeshed. Here, unlike de-growth ideas, he argues not simply for localism but for 'a local *and* a global dimension in recognition of the fact that we live in a world of international communication, a global economy and networked relationships' (Merriman 2015, 255). One consequence of this making of 'relationships between people and objects... the key focus of the collecting enterprise' (Merriman 2015, 262) is that disciplinary and other earlier classifications will no longer be so relevant, with exhibitions and future collecting being more appropriately organised, he suggests, on thematic bases.

Another consequence of this new approach, as already set out more fully in his earlier work, is that if curators no longer see collections as inherited 'inalienable assemblages' but instead as 'dynamic resources, which can be re-worked to suit contemporary and futures needs' (Merriman 2008, 14), then this can also provide a basis for considered – and thoroughly recorded – disposal from those collections. Arguing in 2008 on the basis of a survey that showed that collecting without any accompanying disposal was leading to museums becoming 'unsustainable' and a 'management burden for future generations' (Merriman 2008, 3), and in 2015 that in the face of storage and other problems many had given up collecting altogether, he maintains that museums need to undertake disposal. Doing so should be seen not as a relinquishing of duty, however, but as a following through of interpretive ideas already widely accepted and in order for museums to fulfil their public remit of continuing to collect. Disposal might, indeed, create new 'opportunities for the creation of relationships' (Merriman 2008, 19) – as we have seen in cases above such as the disposed tools that were given to international charities and for use in the education of university students.

The ideas discussed here – which can be seen as part of our wider ethnographic field – are important because they expand understanding of collections' sustainability away from narrow economistic terms (as when stored collections are viewed as resource 'drains'). Instead, they provide more expansive readings of collections as complex assemblages of things, people, and values available for repurposing to present and future needs.

## Conclusion

In this article we have examined the increased discussion and practice of disposing – calculated losing – of items from museum collections. Prompted by instances of, or proposals for, disposal, and by the often ambivalent feelings expressed by curators, encountered in our fieldwork, we looked to ideas of de-growth to consider whether these might provide possibilities for addressing the profusion struggle that many curators tell us they face. As we have described, there are already practices underway that might be seen as compatible with de-growth; and there are already attempts by museum practitioner-scholars to look to museum history and theoretical developments to argue for the greater acceptance of impermanence, contingency, and the relational, thus potentially allowing for 'de-growing' collections.

In drawing on de-growth philosophy, our aim was not to argue that this should necessarily be followed. The ambivalences of the curators in our study – rooted in their senses of care for collections and future relations – need to be taken seriously and will not necessarily be assuaged by the arguments offered by these ideas, or those of Lubar and Merriman. This is perhaps especially so in a climate of suspicion that 'the real motives' for disposal are those of economistic rationalisation. While these motives are undoubtedly sometimes at play, they are not the only

ones informing museums' profusion predicament (Macdonald and Morgan 2018a). The unsustainability of limitless accumulation – which in museums sometimes leads to them stopping collecting altogether – is itself, as in the wider economic sphere, part of the motive for looking for alternative models. Theories of de-growth, which have been developed in order to challenge the core taken-for-granted premise of capitalist-economic theory – namely, continual accumulation and growth – thus clearly offer potential for such models, as we have sought to show here.

Drawing on these ideas also allows us to highlight how what might seem like a museum-specific issue of disposal from collections can be seen as part of wider cultural-economic developments. Museums' questioning of their accumulative practices can be regarded as part of a broader cultural questioning of 'growth' as inevitably positive, at least when understood as a quantitative acquisition of more and more. As modern museum collecting is entangled with the development of capitalist object-relations, as Merriman (2008) briefly notes, it makes sense to explore emerging economic ideas to try to capture some of the changes that are currently underway in museums – and that might point to alternative futures. Also indicative of the broader valence of these currents is that there are close parallels to be found in other areas of heritage, as the work of some of our colleagues in the Heritage Futures project shows. In particular, Caitlin DeSilvey has made powerful calls for 'curating decay' (DeSilvey 2017), and Cornelius Holtorf (2015) for 'avoiding loss aversion', the latter being a concept derived from economic theory. The intensifying of museum disposal discourse and practice can, thus, be located also in a wider move to identify other possible ways of crafting heritage futures. This may entail changes of perspective that, say, understand 'growth' positively as the establishing of denser and richer relations, or releasing certain objects from museums into new contexts of significance, or what we have called their 'afterlives'. This potential is already being activated, for example, in repatriation projects of remains of formerly living people (often referred to as 'human remains') and cultural and natural objects (e.g. Tythacott and Avranitis 2014). A changed perspective might also mean seeing persistent accumulation as a burden rather than as an unequivocally welcome gift to generations to come.

Compelling though alternative models may be, we should also recognise that letting go can hurt, and letting go of some kinds of things may hurt more than others, and can have undesirable consequences. Museums have long been bound up in a politics of erasure through their choices about what is and is not entered into the future archive. Curators have emphasised to us the need for sensitivity, care, and patience when undertaking disposal.

The ideas and approaches that we present here are certainly not the only possible ones for rethinking current and future collecting. Other philosophies and ontologies might also be drawn upon. Our research has shown curators engaging in new ways of thinking and practicing to reconsider not only collecting but also the idea of the museum itself as a mode of crafting more sustainable heritage futures. Because museums are cultural responses to anticipated loss as well as established agencies for performing culturally valued modes of relating to objects over long time-distances, how they do so is vitally relevant not only for museums themselves but for all our futures.

## Notes

1. The UK Museums Association Disposal Toolkit (2014) defines 'deaccessioning' as the decision to formally remove an item from a collection, and 'disposal' the specific method used for discard including loan, transfer, exchange, return, sale, or destruction.
2. This is not to downplay national differences. Tinterow (2011) argues US museums are open to disposal, while Mairesse (2010) claims it is 'banned and widely contested' in France, Italy and Spain. In Austria (ICOM Österreich 2016) and Germany guidelines are fairly recent, but include specific features, such as the latter making distinctions partly by the worth of an object (Schiele 2016).
3. Disposal is typically covered in inter- and national ethical frameworks, including the 'removing collections' section of ICOMs *Code of Ethics for Museums* (1986, amended 2001, revised 2004). Specific examples include the Dutch guidelines (Bergevoet, Kok, and de Wit 2006), UK Spectrum 5.0 guidance (Collections Trust 2017),

and Australian work on 'significance assessment' (Russell and Winkworth 2009). Wijsmuller (2017) produced a database and report on the legal possibilities of European deaccessioning. For review of key documents see DeFors (2007), Merriman (2008), Smith (2012), Lord (2013), Ulph (2016), Robbins (2017).
4. See Merriman (2008), Ouzman (2006), and wider discussion of 'object agency' especially that informed by Indigenous museology, such as Hays-Gilpin and Lomatewama (2013).
5. This language – which, interestingly, is sometimes that of 'realizing the potential' and at others of 'releasing the potential' – has become widespread in UK museum discourse in the twenty-first century, promoted in part by the documentation of the Museums Association, such as Museums Association (2005).

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