

Decolonizing the Future through Archival Museum Fictions: The Case of *Untold Microcosms*

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Abstract

Calls for metropolitan museums to repatriate cultural objects have multiplied in recent years, but they have hit numerous legal roadblocks and political hurdles. Against the backdrop of these obstacles in terms of reparation politics, the short story collection *Untold Microcosms: Latin American Writers in the British Museum* (2022) proposes a symbolic form of reparation by reimagining and reactivating part

of Latin America's forgotten cultural heritage that lays dormant in the museum storage. The article first discusses three different modes of narrativising museum objects. Engaging with the archival turn and cultural memory studies, it then analyses the collection's opening story, an Indigenous futurist tale on a boot-shaped vessel written by the Mixe writer Yásnaya E. Aguilar Gil.

Introduction

This article examines the 2022 volume *Volver a contar. Escritores de América Latina en los archivos del Museo Británico*, which was simultaneously released in English as *Untold Microcosms: Latin American Writers in the British Museum*. As indicated by the Spanish subtitle, the contributing authors delved into the museum's archives and selected an artefact or document that inspired them to write either an (auto)fictional short story or a *crónica*, a type of essayistic and highly subjective reportage. *Untold Microcosms* proposes a form of symbolic reparation by narrativizing and reimagining part of Latin America's forgotten cultural heritage preserved within the museum's storage. By allowing these often overlooked artefacts to talk back, the compilation sets the museum collection in motion and critically revises its function. The ten stories go beyond the traditional 'object biography' and provenance studies promoted by contemporary critical museology by recovering stolen memories, by re-signifying artefacts as bearers of affective histories, closely tied to colonial violence and personal identities—whether ethnic, gendered, or otherwise—and by reinserting them into the social life of things.

In what follows, I will introduce the broader problematic by engaging with the archival turn and cultural memory studies, before outlining three distinct approaches to narrating museum artefacts. I will then examine the opening story of *Untold Microcosms*, an Indigenous futurist tale by Yásnaya E. Aguilar Gil about an apparently ordinary ceramic pot, by focusing on the object's history of decontextualisation and its decolonial reimagination. Aguilar Gil's story envisions how the passively kept object can be revitalised and function outside the museum. Specifically, it addresses the inventory overflow of the British Museum by presenting its *raison d'être* as antiquated and depicting its urge to collect the world as an expression of colonial capitalism.

Until around the turn of the millennium, Western museums were often regarded as dusty, static institutions anchored in the past. The "participatory turn" (Bonet and Négrier) in cultural policies, further amplified by social media, has since brought significant change.

In recent years, many Western museums have even transformed into cultural battlegrounds and agents of social change. No longer seen as venerable temples of universal culture or guardians of the past disconnected from the political, museums have become spaces entrenched in power struggles and embroiled in culture wars and climate activism. In the past decade, the transnational Black Lives Matter movement, collectives like the New York-based Occupy Museums, and initiatives like Black Heritage Trails or Alice Procter's Uncomfortable Art Tours in London have revived the debate on decolonising Western museums. For some of the most vocal critics, self-proclaimed universal or encyclopaedic museums such as the British Museum are relics of bygone times that evoke practices of imperial trophy hunting and cultural appropriation backed by Enlightenment thinking. Rather than being productive repositories of a shared past, some of these museums attest to out-of-date modes of display and unethical collecting practices that led to Indigenous dispossession (both in material and intellectual terms), becoming a meta-museum of sorts that stages superseded forms of thinking about other cultures. The interventions by activists or artists have mainly targeted the visible part of the museum, advocating for the restitution of high-profile, restless artefacts, such as the controversial Benin Bronzes or the sculptures of the Parthenon frieze known as the Elgin marbles, currently housed at the British Museum. The activists and artists also call for a further contextualisation of the displayed objects by considering not only their aesthetic and functional significance, but also their provenance, moral ownership, and the role of the colonial enterprise in founding and funding the museum.

Historically, the British Museum is rooted in the expansion of the British Empire. Its exhibitionary logic of cultural otherness is considered a fundamental pillar, alongside Victorian literature, of the so-called "imperial archive" (Richards 6-7) that classified knowledge and subordinated it to the nation-state and Empire, instilling a sense of cultural supremacy in the mostly white middle-class museumgoers. As Walter D. Mignolo has argued, the object-burdened metropolitan museum is a key institution of the modern-colonial system of domination, specifically in the sense that practices of collecting and categorisation

reproduce the colonial gaze and erase non-Western worlds and forms of thinking or sensing (“Museums in the Colonial Horizon of Modernity” 72).

The ten stories of *Untold Microcosms*, which are all preceded by a picture of the chosen object and a brief curatorial text, uncover narratives hidden in material objects that are not showcased at the British Museum’s main site in Bloomsbury. While some of the writers engage with archival documents such as photographs and visual resources gathered during botanical or ethnographic expeditions, the term ‘archive’ here refers to the museum’s depot that is not visible or accessible to the general public. By adopting the perspective of source communities and privileging subaltern epistemologies, these tales from the vault reinterpret the vast archive of colonial-era collections, decolonising or indigenising the object biographies over which the museum has traditionally asserted expertise. The book is a joint initiative of the transnational Hay Festival, which operates in Europe and the Americas, and the British Museum’s Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence for Latin American Research (SDCELAR). The centre was established in 2019 in order to enhance public knowledge of the museum’s collection of Latin American material culture, of which only a fraction is exhibited in the Mexico Gallery, privileging one geographical area. SDCELAR’s team has undertaken different initiatives in order to better comprehend, reveal, and reinterpret the collection histories by relegating their own curatorial authority to Latin American artists or Indigenous communities, trying to dismantle imperial frames or colonial forms of storytelling and to complement current interpretative labels. Given the limited possibilities for deaccessioning and disposing of objects, due to the management policies such as the British Museum Act,¹ SDCELAR’s collection-based projects can be seen as forms of symbolic restitution amidst growing pressure to repatriate contested objects to their countries of origin.

Arguably, these interventions are more far-reaching than the makeshift solution of physical restitution, as they have the potential

1 The British Museum Act of 1963 prohibits the disposal of museum holdings except in very limited circumstances, such as their physical deterioration or infestation. It also prevents the Trustees of the British Museum from permanently returning objects unless they are duplicates of items already in the collection.

to thoroughly tackle exclusionary narratives and confront structural issues, such as institutional racism, that permeate some displays and influence the sorting practices that regulate the border between the exhibition galleries and the storerooms. They also challenge the museum's tendency to preserve items indefinitely for the sake of the collection, thereby disrupting its dominant rhetoric as an archive of the world that aims to perpetuate the current status quo. Additionally, the volume counters the stultifying effects of musealisation and former director Hartwig Fischer's claim that transferring objects from their place of origin to a museum is a "creative act" that enriches the cultural heritage (quoted in Fokianaki). By using the literary imagination, several stories recover the "stolen memories" (Mignolo, "Enacting the Archives" 13) embodied in the artefacts. They envision a possible rearrangement and recontextualisation of the holdings outside the museum space, thus going beyond the prevailing government policies in the UK and other European countries that are colloquially known as 'retain and explain.'² Since the artefacts cannot legally exit the museum's vaults, *Untold Microcosms* seeks to unlock the utopian potential of the collections, by activating latent archival affordances in order to imagine decolonial futures. It brings the museum objects into circulation through imagination and empowers source communities, who, unlike the global citizens targeted by the museum's universalist discourse, have no access to the museum.

Alongside writer-in-residence projects, literature commissioned by museums reflects an emerging tendency toward inviting artists to creatively rethink and reimagine the museum—not only as a marketing tool, but also as a transformative method for fulfilling the collection's core purposes, such as research, education, and memory-making, in ways that conventional curatorial and scientific methods cannot achieve. Rooted in the archive in both its physical and discursive manifestation, works like *Untold Microcosms* also aim to disrupt the museum and its methods by incorporating ways of engaging with material

2 See for instance the "Guidance for custodians on how to deal with commemorative heritage assets that have become contested" published under the Sunak government in October 2023 (www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-custodians-on-how-to-deal-with-commemorative-heritage-assets-that-have-become-contested).

culture that predate Western ideas of collecting and cataloguing. By challenging a Eurocentric, scientific gaze, these archival museum fictions weave together ancestral and institutional memories, and envision futures that restore Indigenous narratives and perspectives. Through storytelling, they ultimately transform both museum objects and archival materials.

The volume's engagement with cultural heritage, stored away from public view, furthermore points at a recent questioning of the reserve collection as the museum's dark side where the bulk of the collection is forgotten and frozen in time. In past decades, the dominant presentation in metropolitan museums was highly selective, serving a coherent, single master narrative of the progress of civilisation, illuminated by a linear timeline. Recently, however, several museums have reengaged with the relational display of early-modern curiosity cabinets by making their visually overwhelming and theatrical storage rooms publicly accessible, turning them into catalysts for new unexpected stories that arise through association or anachronism—what Mieke Bal (2020) has called, in relation to exhibition visits, “temporal togetherness” (26-27). Similarly, *Untold Microcosms* goes beyond the preservation of individual objects in separate labelled boxes. It reimagines the museum objects' conditions of creation and relates them to other objects of the source communities, as well as to the social and political ecosystems from which they are historically or geographically separated. In this sense, the volume can be seen as a meta-curatorial intervention that goes beyond the traditional conception of curation as custodianship, which usually disregards questions of historical debt, in order to include different forms of reparative care, such as the compensation or restitution of cultural heritage objects aiming at redressing historical imbalances and processes of symbolic violence. As such, the volume seeks to reactivate the ‘dormant’ collections in the storage rooms and indirectly addresses the accusations of hoarding faced by universal museums—what journalist Malcolm Gladwell (2020) has called their “dragon psychology.” By recounting a Borges-like anecdote about the Met's curator of Islamic art who never was able to see what is supposedly one of the world's greatest collection of Persian rugs, stowed away in the

basement of his own museum, Gladwell (0:8:20-0:9:50) evidences that the collection can burden the staff: museums can amass such a vast number of items that retrieving them from packed storerooms becomes cumbersome and costly, ultimately rendering the collections inadequate as research tools.

In the case of the British Museum, currently less than one percent of its eight million objects are on display. Thus, the museum functions more as a ‘storage archive,’ setting aside items that are deemed irrelevant for the present or future, rather than a ‘functional archive’ (Assmann 30). While the storage archive is akin to a latent (cultural) memory that can resurface through exhibition-making or narrativisation, its vastness means that many objects are not only temporarily forgotten, but also risk becoming irretrievably lost. The consequences of this issue became apparent when, just a couple of months after the release of *Untold Microcosms*, the revelation of the alleged theft of up to 2,000 artefacts from the storage rooms by a curator tarnished the British Museum’s reputation as a safe and responsible custodian of vulnerable world heritage. The idea that only Western institutions could properly safeguard the world’s treasures is often used as a nationalist and neo-colonialist argument to back the retentionist policies of these institutions, many of which are ironically accused of cultural theft themselves and of amassing other nations’ cultural patrimony as economic and cultural capital. The scandal of the missing objects revealed the inadequate documentation of items that lay unregistered deep in the basement or external storage facilities and that are often wrongly attributed and misdescribed. More recently, the museum has also been accused of a lack of transparency for secretly holding onto sacred objects which were deemed unfit for display (Addley 2024).

Writing the Life of Objects: Biography, Necrography, Fabulography

Since the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property, and the post-WWII debate on Nazi looting and colonial plunder, museums have placed significant

emphasis on scientific research concerning the legal provenance and traceability of their collections. This has led to a proliferation of cultural biographies of objects (Kopytoff 64). This biographical approach to material culture focuses on the physical journey of objects, their relationship with similar objects, and the transformation of their status as well as the values assigned to them under the impact of the socio-political climate. When it comes to non-European artefacts, this type of research often solely concentrates on the history of their reception from the moment of their ‘discovery’ and incorporation into metropolitan collections, without providing a narrative that transcends the Eurocentric framework. This method is exemplified in the popular science book *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (2010) by Neil MacGregor, the former director of the British Museum. The book adopts a universalist perspective and a neutral enunciative position to reconstruct the life of objects housed in the museum: “telling history through things is what museums are for” (xiii). The resulting image of the museum is that of a Foucauldian heterotopia or a Borgesian Aleph, allowing one to see the entire world and all epochs in one place, as if the museum did not bear the adjective ‘British’ in its name. As a result, the book mainly highlights the artistic-historical value of the objects as a legacy of humanity and the layers of meaning that have accumulated throughout the object’s journey. However, the book overlooks the questionable collection methods and the forms of colonial exploitation or epistemic violence that are part of the life cycle of many objects. It also fails to adopt a constructivist perspective on how the pieces became ‘disciplinary’ (archaeological, ethnographic, etc.) objects and how they were encapsulated in a classificatory-encyclopaedic order that proposes a particular codification of knowledge while neglecting the loss triggered by the material diaspora of entire cultures, thereby perpetuating biased and imperial narratives.

Hence, the archaeologist and curator Dan Hicks advocates in *The British Museums* for writing “necrographies” (xiv) that shift the focus from the museum career of the object and the circumstances of its production, to its symbolic death. Hicks’s “Europessimistic” vision (xii) reveals the repression of Indigenous knowledge and identities, interpreting

non-Western museum objects as traces of unfinished colonialism. Against the supposedly concealing and self-legitimising discourse of anthropology or archaeology, this type of forensic writing intends to bring to light the brutality and barbarism surrounding the circumstances of their acquisition and is primarily oriented towards political action, facilitating repatriation, adjusting the classic image of the museum as a pinnacle of civilisation, and dismantling the “white infrastructure” (xiii) of the museum world. However, by privileging the crime scene, necrographies, as Hicks understands them, give prominence to the looters at the expense of other actors such as artists or heritage managers, neglect the pre-history of objects before they entered the collection, and present them as exhausted, devoid of life and agency.

Against the unilateral and limited visions of the biographical and necrographic approaches, it is more productive to opt for what memoirist and cultural theorist Saidiya Hartman has called “critical fabulations” (“Venus in Two Acts” 11), which are narratives that mix fiction, historical research, and critical theory. They allow the archive to be read with and against the grain, rescuing subaltern voices and revaluing original frames of reference. Critical fabulations are counter-narratives that avoid the museum’s metadiscourse, establish unexpected connections, and imaginatively fill in the blanks in the histories of the origin and trajectory of cultural items. Hartman’s essay “Venus in Two Acts” attempts to repair the constitutive violence of the transatlantic slavery archive by rearranging the story into a “recombinant narrative” (12) that interconnects past, present, and future, and by surrounding the authorised discourse (historiographic, museographic, etc.) with a chorus of counterfactual voices and stories. In this way, the timeless perpetuity of the museum/archive is questioned. The act of fabulating, triggered by the ambivalent role of the museum as agent of deculturation and as archive of human creativity, allows for the reinterpretation of collections and the resignification of objects to project alternative futures and transcend the repertoire of interpretations offered by the curators. In this way, it is possible to reconnect with a past that was interrupted. When the collected objects are passively kept in the bowels of the museum they become muted. Through speculation and artistic imagination,

these material traces of the past—of which the origins and function are often unknown due to the lack of historical documentation—are reinterpreted and revealed as depositories of sentimental or cultural values or religious beliefs. The stories in *Untold Microcosms* foreground the creative recontextualisation of material culture by taking advantage of the polysemy of liminal objects with scientific, functional, ritual, or aesthetic meanings. While the catalogue tends to ascribe stable meanings to museum objects, often essentializing the cultures from which they originate, fabulation allows them to be reimaged as relational objects, thereby questioning the rigid categorisation and classification inherent in museological discourse. This approach dynamises the static nature of the depot and the preservation policies that govern museums. By adopting a more pluriversal narrative that decentralises or ‘provincialises’ Europe—taking into account personal testimonies and memories from the communities of origin and their descendants—this method can serve as a catalyst for future restitution processes. It can further help to explain why artefacts need to be returned, thereby allowing for a more ethical storytelling of objects, and preventing restitution from being framed within a colonialist logic. In this way, museum-commissioned literature such as the stories of *Untold Microcosms* can drive changes in how objects are stored and curated in the museum space, transforming the museum into a site for critical fabulation.

A Utopian Archive: “Letter to a Young Mixe Historian”

Yásnaya E. Aguilar Gil (Ayutla Mixe, 1981) is a writer, linguist and activist of Mixe (or Ayuujk) descent. She is a staunch defender of her community’s traditions and Mexico’s linguistic diversity. Her work frequently addresses cultural survival, Indigenous thought, and the preservation of nature, for instance as the co-presenter, together with Gael García Bernal, of the web documentary “El tema” (2021) on Mexico’s climate crisis. Her story “Letter to a Young Mixe Historian” revolves around a surprisingly conventional object that is neither exquisite nor rare: a *yäjktstu’ujts* (known as *patojo* in Spanish), a ceramic vessel

shaped like a shoe used for cooking beans. The inclusion of this familiar kitchenware in the museum collection leads the writer to imagine its rediscovery in a postapocalyptic future. According to the collection database, the pot in question was manufactured in the 1980s and acquired by field collectors Chloe Sayer and Elizabeth M. Carmichael in Tamazulapam del Espíritu Santo, in the northeast of Oaxaca, in the same decade.³ It can be classified as what Trevor Jones and Rainey Tisdale term a “lazy artefact” (7), as it has never been exhibited and does not actively support the museum’s mission.

The story takes the form of a letter written by Mejy, a Mixe historian working on the management of historical heritage in the late twenty-second century, to her niece Anaatuuj, who recently joined one of the Historical Studies Societies. In the story, the Mixe community survived the climatic catastrophes triggered by the despised period known as the ‘Capitalist Night,’ a term echoing the ‘Sad Night’ in Mexican historiography, which refers to the Spanish conquistadors’ withdrawal following the massacre at the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán in 1520. The subsequent Spanish reprisals accelerated the decline of the Aztec civilisation and propelled an apocalyptic imaginary through which Amerindians have lived for centuries. Thus, the story draws a parallel between the post-Conquest “survivance”—a term coined by Gerald Vizenor (24) to describe the active survival and resistance of Indigenous cultures—and a sustainable Indigenous future after a world-altering cataclysm, showing how native people continue to thrive thanks to their time-honoured customs. It also foreshadows the disruptive impact of the climate crisis on our cultural landscapes, highlighting that our material heritage is at risk because of rising sea levels and suggesting that some museums might have a more extensive past than a future. The narrator posits that this decline is driven by the extractivist logic of capitalism and colonialism which, in her view, also permeated the cultural infrastructure in the past.

The *yäjktstu’ujts* serves as a generic example of an artefact that fills a gap within the British Museum’s encyclopaedic collection, evoking

3 See the description of item Am1986,06.84 in the Collection online: www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Am1986-06-84.

the risk of pigeonholing and loss of individuality in archival thinking. Unlike most stories of *Untold Microcosms*, the author does use the archive to revisit the past, but she insists on an Indigenous futurity that confronts troubling colonial legacies. The story takes the form of a letter that is reminiscent of Gloria Anzaldúa's epistolary essay "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter To Third World Women Writers" (1981), but it is first and foremost an example of speculative writing that reclaims Indigenous cosmogonies and local cultural traditions that were subjected to assimilation, erasure, or devaluation, in order to challenge the Western world-vision, and imagine other possible futures. Indigenous futurisms is a fairly broad term coined by Anishinaabe cultural critic Grace Dillon to refer to artistic and literary works that recover Indigenous voices and traditions through science fiction—a genre historically intertwined with imperialist expansion and colonialism (Rieder) and kin to ethnographic discourse (Haraway 440)—while renewing traditional ecological knowledge in contrast to the "techno-driven western scientific method" (Dillon 7). The term often describes how Indigenous people use digital technologies and social media, not as consumable goods, but as tools of cultural resistance. More specifically, the story also pertains to what Carmen Alemany (38) has called "post-indigenist science fiction," because of Aguilar Gil's engagement with critical posthumanism, feminism, and ecocriticism. It emphasises the troubling neo-colonial role of extractive technology as a tool serving unbridled economic growth, while portraying Indigenous people as deprived of this technology or as merely passive receptors. In this sense, Aguilar Gil's story is a thought experiment to 're-indigenise' cultural values and practices, thereby relegating hybridity as the marker of Latin American culture or as the cultural logic of globalisation.

In an opinion piece published in *El País*, Aguilar Gil criticises the focus on a "hyper-technologised future" (May. ¿Un futurismo indígena?) prevalent in Western popular culture, especially within the Hollywood imaginary. Aguilar Gil argues that this dominant vision of science fiction limits the range of possibilities for imagining different future scenarios:

We have naturalised both the shadow of the West projecting onto the past and its projection onto the future. It seems that, outside of the menu the West serves us, it is difficult for us to imagine the ingredients of the future from other linguistic, social, or political frameworks. (“May. ¿Un futurismo indígena?”)⁴

Drawing inspiration from the Afrofuturist movement, Aguilar Gil advocates for speculative fiction that “reinterprets tradition not only in light of the present but also in light of the future” (“May. ¿Un futurismo indígena?”).⁵ But while Afrofuturism is often predicated on speculative high-tech innovations and space travels, Aguilar Gil’s futuristic work recurs to a broader and more holistic sense of skill or craft, aligning more closely with *teknè* (understood as the artisanal techniques to produce a manufactured item and the traditional knowledge held by a guild or a clan) than with modern technology, including the archive as a supposedly neutral technology of progress. Her work rather focuses on domestic technologies and creative, artisan practices that are purposeful and communitarian. In questioning the link between technology and capitalism, Aguilar Gil (“A Modest Proposal to Save the World”) coined the concept of ‘tequiology,’ derived from the ancient concept of *tequio* or community work.⁶ This term represents a more sustainable and collaborative technology that resists the privatisation of knowledge. This approach supports decolonial resistance and challenges entrenched assumptions about Indigenous peoples and Western science.

In order to achieve this, the archive is crucial, as it enables the exploration of alternative futures by revisiting untaken paths from the

4 “Hemos naturalizado tanto la sombra de occidente proyectándose sobre el pasado como estamos naturalizando su proyección sobre el futuro. Pareciera que, fuera del menú que occidente nos sirve, nos resulta complicado imaginar los ingredientes del futuro desde otros marcos lingüísticos, sociales o políticos.”

5 “reinterpret[e] la tradición no solo a la luz del presente sino también a la luz del futuro”

6 The Aztec concept of *tequio* (from the Nahuatl *tequill*, meaning ‘duty’ or ‘tribute’) refers to a system of rotating civic duties rooted in collaboration and reciprocity. Practised by Indigenous communities in highland Mexico for thousands of years, this tradition of obligatory, unpaid communal labour still persists in some rural parts of Mexico. Similar cooperative institutions can be found in other Mesoamerican societies as well (Carballo 246).

past and symbolically repairing historical injustices. Before this story, Aguilar Gil published other texts where she adopts a future vantage point to critique hegemonic ideas on neoliberalism and the cultural infrastructure. In her speculative essay “El arte, la literatura y las estéticas colectivas de la tierra” (2021), she also creatively manipulates time by presenting a pseudotranslation of a text purportedly written in 2172 by “Mixe communal networks.” The essay depicts a future that mirrors an Indigenous past where the concept of individual authorship does not exist, echoing Cristina Rivera Garza’s (5) engagement with the Mixe concept of communality and her ‘poetics of disappropriation’ that fosters communal modes of writing which articulate survival strategies grounded in mutual care and the preservation of the common good.

In the story, the Mixe letter-writer Mejy recounts the fortuitous discovery of a box containing the *yäjktstu’ujts*, which was washed ashore near her workplace. This object stems from the “great museum in the northern islands” (Aguilar Gil, “Letter” 12), a fictional territory representing the European continent, which vanished due to a catastrophic flood at the end of the twenty-first century that decimated the earth’s population and swallowed up the museum, which the attentive reader will identify as the British Museum. In other words, the pot is seen as a material remnant of an idea—considered obsolete and out of place—known as ‘museum,’ which, in the present of narrative, is no longer perceived as a centre of education and knowledge, but merely as a colonial whim. Moreover, the narrator describes museums as anachronistic “prisons for memory” (9) which confine and petrify art—or what is typically labelled as ‘craft’ within a Eurocentric vision—far from its context of creation. To overcome this confinement of memory in a museum understood as a sanctuary (in the etymological sense of the ancient Greek word *μουσείον*, meaning temple or shrine of the Muses), the narrator believes it is necessary to approach history as a “complex narrative ecosystem” (9) that energises collective memory.

The narrator’s dealing with artefacts evokes the tribal or community museums established in Mexico from the 1980s onwards to negotiate and challenge hegemonic narratives about the past and to propose alternative notions of local and ancestral memory: “evidence of the past

is kept in communal spaces that continually give each piece new meaning, rather than having it all bundled together in one place” (17). In other words, the discovery of the *yäjktstu’ujts* prompts a reflection on the relevance of museums and, by extension, archives, which, according to the narrator, derive their primary value from their ability to provoke narration:

It would seem absurd to us to confine everything valuable to a specific building miles away from the context in which it was created. Oral history is more important than ever for us, and objects are nothing but tools for activating our memories. Twentieth- and twenty-first centuries museums seem to us the antithesis of our current practices of protecting history and memory, but that is in large part because we only have evidence of metropolitan museums from that period, which were erected as trophies of colonialism. (9-10)

Whereas museums are considered to be object-collecting centres which disrupt the natural life cycle of these objects by petrifying them, the Historical Studies Societies are presented as liberatory spaces for social change, where “evidence of the past is kept in communal spaces that continually give each piece new meaning” (9). These centres are polyphonic and participatory spaces for critical dialogues about the past and future; they function like lending libraries that help people find meaning and belonging by sharing stories that can support them and offer care. In this sense, the visitors become curators of their own experiences, and “ethnographic objects” (Fabian 49)—i.e., objects that are carriers of and subject to the discipline of ethnography—become ethnic artefacts again, part of a living culture in which authority and knowledge production is shared. As such, the pot is no longer seen as merely a decorative object meant to be contemplated, or relegated to the status of a “semiophore” (Pomian 32), that is to say an object without use, but charged with with meaning. Rather, it is reframed as part of a physical and socio-cultural ecosystem. Curation here focuses not on segregation and on authoritative, monologic narratives typically conveyed by museums,

but on connecting objects to intangible cultural heritage through storytelling and singling out their singularity instead of their typicality. This approach reactivates the traditional knowledge and values embedded in the objects, revalorising their complex layers of meaning rather than reducing them to mere things-in-themselves that were accumulated through dispossession by (neo)colonial capitalism.

Within the anthology, Aguilar Gil's approach to the archive is also novel because it broadens the debate about the colonial entanglements of museums by opting for an object that is not a pre-Columbian archaeological piece covered in patina, but rather a daily-use vessel crafted by Mixe artisans shortly before it was incorporated into the museum's ethnographic collection. In other words, it is an oddly familiar object for Aguilar Gil, akin to an uncanny experience triggered by a sense of temporal disorientation. At the same time, the archive functions as a mirror that returns a distorted and stereotypical reflection to the narrator who recognises the museum object as a daily-use item and sees her culture as museified and relegated to the past. This urge to collect contemporary objects is rooted in the paradigm of salvage anthropology, which consists of zealously collecting data and objects of cultures perceived as 'authentic,' but thought to be on the brink of 'extinction' due to globalisation or Westernisation (Redman 6-7). This paradigm reinforces Eurocentric and essentialist colonial ideas of Indigenous cultures as 'static' and 'unchanging.'

It is noteworthy that the choice of the pot is not random, as it conveys a critique of the coloniality of knowledge and power that continues to perpetuate subjugation and exploitation in the present era. By emphasising the continuity between the colonial period and late capitalism, the narrator speaks of "colonising metropolises" (11) and "colonialist looting" (10) when referring to the postcolonial period. In this way, Aguilar Gil suggests that the acquisition of objects like the *yäjktstu'ujts* points to an ongoing colonisation of the imagination and an allochronic projection of contemporary Indigenous culture into a distant past. By being included in the catalogue, the pot attains the status of a marvellous and exotic object. Many museums that claim a universalist vocation, such as the British Museum, follow acquisition

policies and archival practices rooted in a vision that reduces all of humanity to ‘otherness,’ while implicitly elevating modern Western culture as the normative standard and justifying imperial expropriations. Hence, museums continue to exert symbolic violence based on the idea of a difference (and evolutionary progression) between ‘primitive’ or ‘premodern’ societies versus ‘complex’ industrial or ‘(post)modern’ societies, whose utensils are not displayed on a pedestal or in a showcase.

The retrospective narration from a Mixe focaliser provides the reader with a deautomatised vision that highlights the gap between the present and the future, which is also framed in ethical terms. The defamiliarisation applies to both the perception of reality and to semantic issues, pointing to the Eurocentric dimension of language. The classic antinomy of civilisation versus barbarism prevalent in Latin American cultural thought is inverted, portraying the Mixe people as a centre of resistance and a repository of ancestral wisdom, standing against the supposed irrationality and self-destructive behaviour that, according to the narrator, marked the previous “centuries of madness” (15). This reversal is poignantly illustrated in the passage where the narrator expresses indignation at how the existence of museums was once seen as natural, drawing a parallel with zoos as symbols of past barbarity. The narrator is surprised that her people were once labelled ‘Indigenous’ and is puzzled by the social marginalisation of her ancestors: “it was a peripheral community in the middle of Abya Yala” (12). The use of this Guna toponym, employed by many Indigenous leaders and decolonial scholars to refer to the entire continent as it existed before 1492, underscores the story’s de-Westernised perspective of the future. Furthermore, by choosing the term ‘Capitalist Night,’ Aguilar Gil establishes an analogy between extractivist colonialism and late capitalism, which colonises all spheres of economic and social life. In the story, the rampant extraction of natural resources and cheap labour ultimately led to environmental collapse and the annihilation of the old world. The narrator also parallels the dispossession of land with the dispossession of cultural objects. Indeed, the extractivist spirit extends to the handling of the archive, as the usurpation of the past and foreign knowledge legitimises

colonial domination, the endurance of museums and the perpetuation of the status quo, which can be overcome through speculative fabulation.

Ultimately, the decision to acquire the pot by the British Museum can also be interpreted as a reflection of an industrialised society, where handmade work is seen as both outdated and distinctive, and thus worthy of collection. In a society characterised by mass production, robotisation, and commodity fetishism, there is a collective forgetfulness of human labour and craftsmanship involved in the production of goods, a view rooted in Marxist theory. The narrator seeks to reverse the primacy of exchange value (the abstract value of money) over use value and symbolic-identity value, which characterised the capitalist market economy of the past by returning the “orphaned” museum objects “extracted through processes of colonial violence” (14) to the communities that created them. While, in Marx’s theory, modern capitalist society believed it had surpassed the superstitious worship of material objects (understood as demonised fetishes) of so-called ‘primitive’ societies, in Aguilar Gil’s story, it is the Indigenous peoples of the future who overcome the cult of things that once defined capitalist consumption and certain curatorial practices. Playing with the nineteenth-century *topos* of museums as warehouses of cultures in which artefacts are commodities, the narrator sees museums as monuments to our Western fetish for things, as a celebration of materialism shaped by the same primitive accumulation that brought about capitalism. As happens with hyperconsumerism, encyclopaedic museums exhibit symptoms of compulsive hoarding, partly due to their origins in imperial archival practices.

The narrator intends to return the pot to female clay artisans, but it arouses no curiosity among them. The pot from the past, which was an oddity for twentieth-century curators, is now considered ordinary or lifeless. In the narrator’s value system, the object is not appreciated because it lacks signs of use, having never undergone a bath in a cornmeal drink in order to become waterproof—a simple gesture of reappropriation to integrate it into daily life which is described as ‘cure’ in the Ayuujk language. By stating that the ‘uncured’ *yäjktstu’ujts* is transformed in the community kitchen, Aguilar Gil plays with this double sense of preservation (making the pot waterproof and durable) and healing (rectifying past

wrongs and creating a more inclusive approach to cultural heritage, that involves source communities):

Almost two hundred years later, the *yäjktstu'ujts* that had once been a museum object had its first atole bath and thus began the life it would have had if the exoticising gaze had not confined it to a museum. Solely out of a sense of symbolic justice, I stayed in the society of female clay workers' community kitchen until the first beans were ready to eat. [...] the *yäjktstu'ujts* sitting on the embers, returned to a system of values and symbolism that give it a purpose and a meaning, as familiar as they are necessary. (15)

By highlighting the cultural continuity of the Mixe culture, the story exposes Western thought as stuck in time. The memories of the future in “Letter to a Young Mixe Historian” serve to critique cultural disempowerment and underscore the need to decolonise knowledge, by prefiguring a global cataclysm that entails the revaluation of other ways of being/knowing and undermines the idea of Europe as a universal point of reference.

Moreover, the choice of a pot is not fortuitous since it evokes science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1988), which challenges dominant science fiction narratives of technology. In this text, Le Guin redefines the story itself as a ‘container,’ as a cultural technology through which the collective sustenance of life and culture takes form. According to Le Guin, the first cultural device was likely a recipient—a symbol of care—rather than a weapon, which features the masculinist and individualist “killer story” (33) marked by conflict and earth-destroying fantasies that have become dominant in the Western imagination. This new feminist origin story favours the role of female foragers over male hunters and prompts a revaluation of technology and, by extension, speculative fiction. A story—or, for that matter, a museum—can be conceived of as a carrier bag, a vessel whose purpose “is neither resolution nor stasis but *continuing process*” (35; italics mine). In her own carrier-bag story, Aguilar Gil disentangles science from what

Le Guin terms the triumphant “Techno-Heroic” (36) characterised by a linear-progressive time, “high technology founded upon continuous economic growth” (36), and heteropatriarchal capitalism. Instead, she advocates writing “life stories” (33) that focus on a process of continual transformation and are non-linear and open-ended, following the elliptic Mixe conception of time. Aguilar Gil foregrounds the role of women as caretakers and *passeurs* who ensure that cultural heritage, traditions and collective memory are passed down and remain vibrant and relevant over time.⁷ As seed gatherers and story collectors, these women invest in the community’s continuity and resilience, ensuring that their stories will carry on long after they are gone. In this sense, Aguilar Gil insists on cultural ‘matrimony’ characterised by shared stewardship over a Western-centred conception of patrimony, which historically has erased the agency of women and is fixated on property rights, accumulation, and classification.

Conclusions

Starting from objects that are not visible to museumgoers, *Untold Microcosms* addresses the complex relationship between Europe and Latin America. Through an examination of the British Museum’s archives, the ten stories in the collection engage in various forms of historical and symbolic justice, presenting alternative ways of seeing that have often been undervalued. Due to its interdisciplinary nature and the origin of the initiative, the book raises several ethical concerns. Specifically, there is a risk that the voices of Latin American authors may be co-opted by the institutional discourse and domesticated by curatorial intentions, thus helping to absolve the British Museum of

7 Le Guin’s application of the hunter-gatherer analogy to writing resonates powerfully with a new generation of female writers from Latin America, such as Alejandra Costamagna (Chile), Margarita García Robayo (Colombia), and Verónica Gerber (Mexico). This perspective is vindicated in the very title of Lorena Amaro Castro’s interview book *Recolectoras* (2023). Like Aguilar Gil, these authors favour ‘gatherer’ styles of fiction, which focus on sustenance and preservation and are marked by scraps and leftovers that are juxtaposed in unexpected ways, over the traditional male ‘hunter narratives’ about heroic quests and trophies characterised by well-rounded and sequential types of plot. In a similar vein, *Untold Microcosms* resembles a carrier bag filled with disparate archival objects, where the stories and memories they hold become entangled, enriching each other.

historical complicity, justifying the stockpiling of heritage resources, and downplaying the exploitation involved, contributing to what is known as ‘colonial whitewashing.’ However, the nature of the critical fabulations contributes to dismantling hegemonic cultural narratives perpetuated by state institutions. The stories extend beyond the museum’s own cultural history and colonial practices of collecting by revisiting Latin American past through its materiality and rereading the future through present concerns and lessons of the past. The author’s creative engagement with the archive questions the traditional way collections have been unlocked. This imaginative approach disrupts the linear-teleological conception of time that continues to govern many contemporary exhibitions.

Beyond this critique of the colonisation of time, “Letter to a Young Mixe Historian” envisions a future where the British Museum no longer exists and foreign artefacts are returned to their cultures of origin. The museum acts as a time-capsule, not merely to address gaps in the archive through critical fabulation, but to reimagine the future through narrative practices of worldmaking based on gathering and speculation. Aguilar Gil’s futurism explores other possibilities for preserving memory through oral history centres, where—unlike classical museums that freeze objects through catalogues or display cases—objects from the past are reactivated. Hence, the story imagines a different kind of relationship with the items stored in the archives, which are typically seen as culturally inert. Additionally, it re-examines museum objects in light of the socio-environmental challenges of the present. In this sense, the archive is conceived as dynamic and open to the future, as Stuart Hall points out: “An archive may be largely about ‘the past’ but it is always ‘re-read’ in the light of the present and the future: and in that reprise, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, it always flashes up before us as a moment of danger” (92). In the face of environmental apocalypse and restitution feuds, Aguilar Gil imagines a sustainable and decolonial future in a Benjaminian way, that is, exhuming it from the ruins of the past.

Starting with a seemingly ordinary pot, similar to the ones on her own stove, Aguilar Gil questions the tendency to musealise the everyday life of foreign cultures and problematises the scientific gaze that selects

the objects within the British Museum's collections. Indigenous futurism allows her to recognise the power relations, ethnocentrism, and colonial legacies that pervade museum practices, and to imagine new archives governed by an Indigenous locus of enunciation. Thus, the narrative challenges the symbolic violence perpetuated by expert knowledge, which frequently occupies an external etic stance, and promotes a type of heritage activation from an internal or emic perspective. In Aguilar Gil's view, the British Museum's archive symbolises imperial expansion and the erasure of colonial exploitation and expropriation processes. The narrative explores the latency of the archives that hold both ancestral memory and memory of colonial violence, illustrating the potential of these collections to recount the histories of those dispossessed of both history and life by the modern-colonial system. However, Aguilar Gil's radical rejection of the traditional museum leads her to envision a future museum solely in terms of a space of experiences and relationships (i.e., a conception that privileges narration and starts from the subject as interpellated by objects), rather than as a showcase of collections or as repository of cultural heritage. This prompts a reflection on whether the objects would have contributed to the activation and refunctionalisation of memory if they had remained in their countries of origin instead of in the British Museum, where they not only contribute to a sense of belonging (a narrative about oneself that promotes intergenerational dialogue and community continuity), but also to the recognition and respect of alterity, without necessarily domesticating difference. In other words, the relocation of artefacts could be seen as a way to renew cultural knowledge and foster intercultural dialogue. Moreover, Aguilar Gil's critique seems to overlook that interactive exhibitions in many museums already encourage viewers to be active and critical participants rather than passive consumers. By contrasting European thought with Mixe thought, the story may disregard the efforts of numerous museums to integrate both Western and non-Western perspectives, aiming to better understand and analyse the profoundly hybrid nature of contemporary cultures.

While Aguilar Gil's narrative presents a radical and dichotomous view that rejects the museum altogether and opposes Latin America

to Europe, the anthology as a whole offers a kaleidoscopic view of the role of museums and does justice to the complexity of the discussion about the restitution of objects. It leverages the archive's potential as a repository for future-oriented memories. The book underscores that restitution requests not only revolve around the ownership of objects but are deeply intertwined with cultural and historical identity. Far from proposing a necrographic approach as practised by historians or anthropologists, *Untold Microcosms* interrogates the present through the lens of tradition and aims to advance decoloniality through heritage. The stories curate archival materials into a catalogue for an imagined exhibition, transforming a static storage archive into a dynamic functional archive that serves as an antidote against colonial amnesia, thus highlighting the potential of the museum storage to renew the cultural memory. Instead of hoarding, the museum of the future should glean or ragpick in the Benjaminian sense, repurposing the objects discarded in its vast storage rooms through speculation or other creative interventions. These acts do not only fill in archival gaps, but also create stories which exceed the archive, to paraphrase Hartman (*Wayward Lives* 360). In this sense, *Untold Microcosms* can inspire museum practitioners to grant their collections new afterlives that challenge the dominant narratives underpinning the imperial archive. Just as Ursula Le Guin redefines the role of fiction as a container that holds and nourishes, rather than conquers and destroys, the museum could similarly be reconceived as a metaphorical carrier bag that gathers diverse cultural objects and stories, as a place where objects are collected not merely for preservation, but also for reappropriation, reinterpretation, and the creation of new, plural narratives.

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Biography

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