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An Exploration in Museum Diversity and Inclusivity

Jaimie Davis

Cultural Anthropology Independent Study

Anthropology and Museums

- ❖ Museums began in Greco-Roman times as representations of power by displaying “exotic” items from other places.²
 - Nationalism is deeply tied to museums.
 - The Greeks and Romans would put items from conquests on display. Anything seen as other would be proof of their wealth and power.
 - Anthropology developed as a discipline during this time, and “the first step was the establishment of the ethnographic museums.”⁸
- ❖ The elites have mass control of displaying exhibits.
 - “Collections of *exotica* had long existed at the European courts... systematic collection of *ethnographica* only started in the 1800s. Large national museums were established... and these would all eventually develop influential ethnographic departments.”⁸

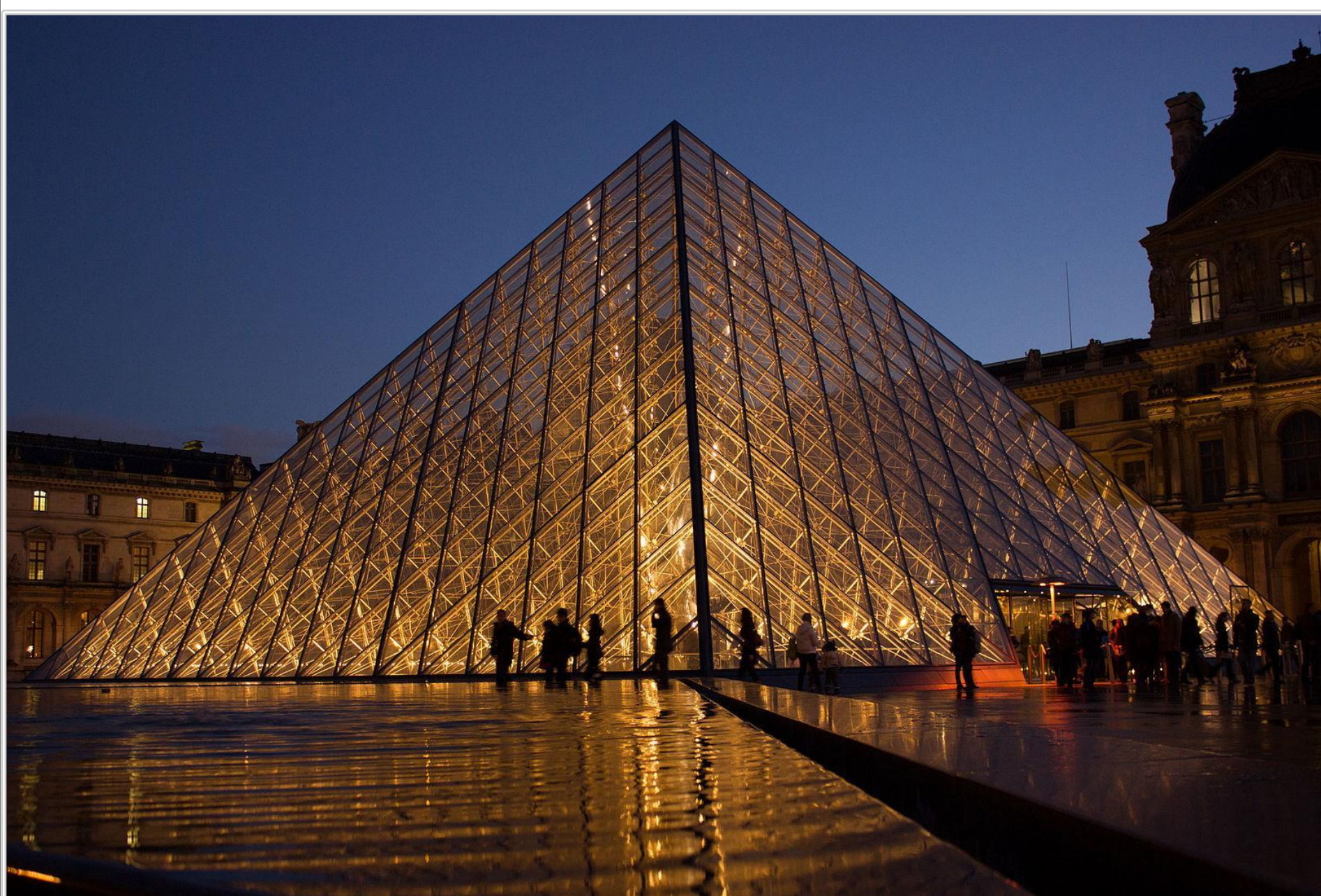


Figure 1. The Louvre Museum, Paris¹²

Thesis Statement

Museums have colonial origins and because of this there are many ways in which diversity and inclusivity are lacking in the institution.

As a result of the colonial origins of museums, many institutions lack diversity and inclusivity.

Diversity and Inclusion



Figure 2. An example of an Assyrian Relief, one of which has been a hot topic of repatriation between a seminary, a dealer, and the Iraqi ministry of culture.⁹

- ❖ **Neurodivergence**
 - Neurodivergent people can be included in the museum sphere by creating spaces that are welcoming and inclusive to those who perceive sensory input differently than the neurotypical.
- ❖ **Race and Minorities**
 - “The most important business strategy book every museum leader should read is the *United States Census*.”²
 - “According to U.S. Census data, 35 percent of all U.S. residents are ‘minorities’.”²
 - ‘Minority’ is misleading. According to demographers, America will become a majority-minority country in the next thirty years.
 - Working with native advisors so we have the right to tell these stories and allow them to be stewards of their stories.
 - Prioritizing native voices is important. Since most history is written by white academic observers, it creates an oppressive narrative.¹¹
 - Classifications of museums contribute to othering groups of people.¹¹
- ❖ **Economics**
 - The idea of museums’ origin being facilitated by only those high in status follows the logic that those who face economic hardship would find museum access difficult.
 - Wealth inequality and economic stratification.
 - “market-thinking has determined and exacerbated many of the inequalities we currently see throughout the sector [economically]”²
- ❖ **We all have an intersection of identities that exist at the same time²**
 - Museums should seek to be available to provide education and entertainment for all people.

Potential Solutions

- “The hardest thing about inclusive leadership is that it is something we will need to work on forever.”³
- ❖ “Getting comfortable with discomfort in museums to make space for criticality and collaboration that goes beyond outsourcing decolonization discourse to artists and activists and engaging with world politics.”¹
 - ❖ Many museums are internally creating ways to improve access to museums.
 - “University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) engages students in studying the challenges related to the underrepresentation of communities of color... and other marginalized groups in historical organizations, museums, and public history graduate programs.”
 - MNHS is taking a proactive stance with a semester-long course which educates people on diversity and inclusivity.
 - ❖ **MAP (museumprogress.com)**
 - “Our goal is to provide a platform for collaborative inquiry where museum professionals can create better futures for museums that are rooted in a deep understanding of the people they want to support.”⁶
 - Neurodivergence
 - Commissioning artwork for autistic children that allows for physical interaction and soothing stimulation.² New patrons that otherwise wouldn’t come to museums would be encouraged to attend.
 - ❖ **Repatriation**
 - The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 allows Native Americans to reclaim cultural artifacts and remains.⁵
 - Native bones were often displayed and stolen whilst discovered bones of Europeans were often treated with more respect.
 - Museums should not only collect and keep, but also repatriate spiritual items acquired through colonization.⁵
 - This process can have many different outcomes:
 - “Museums and governments explore exchanges, long-term loans, and other arrangements that acknowledge claims to ownership and cultural legitimacy while still allowing objects to be viewed and experienced both in their homelands and in more distant institutions.”¹¹



Figure 3. Diversity and Inclusivity drawing.⁹

Conclusion

The museum world has many ways that it can improve its accessibility to all people. The content of museums is becoming more diverse and the visitors that come to see exhibits, as well as those who work internally, should reflect that visible change.

THE LENS OF SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION

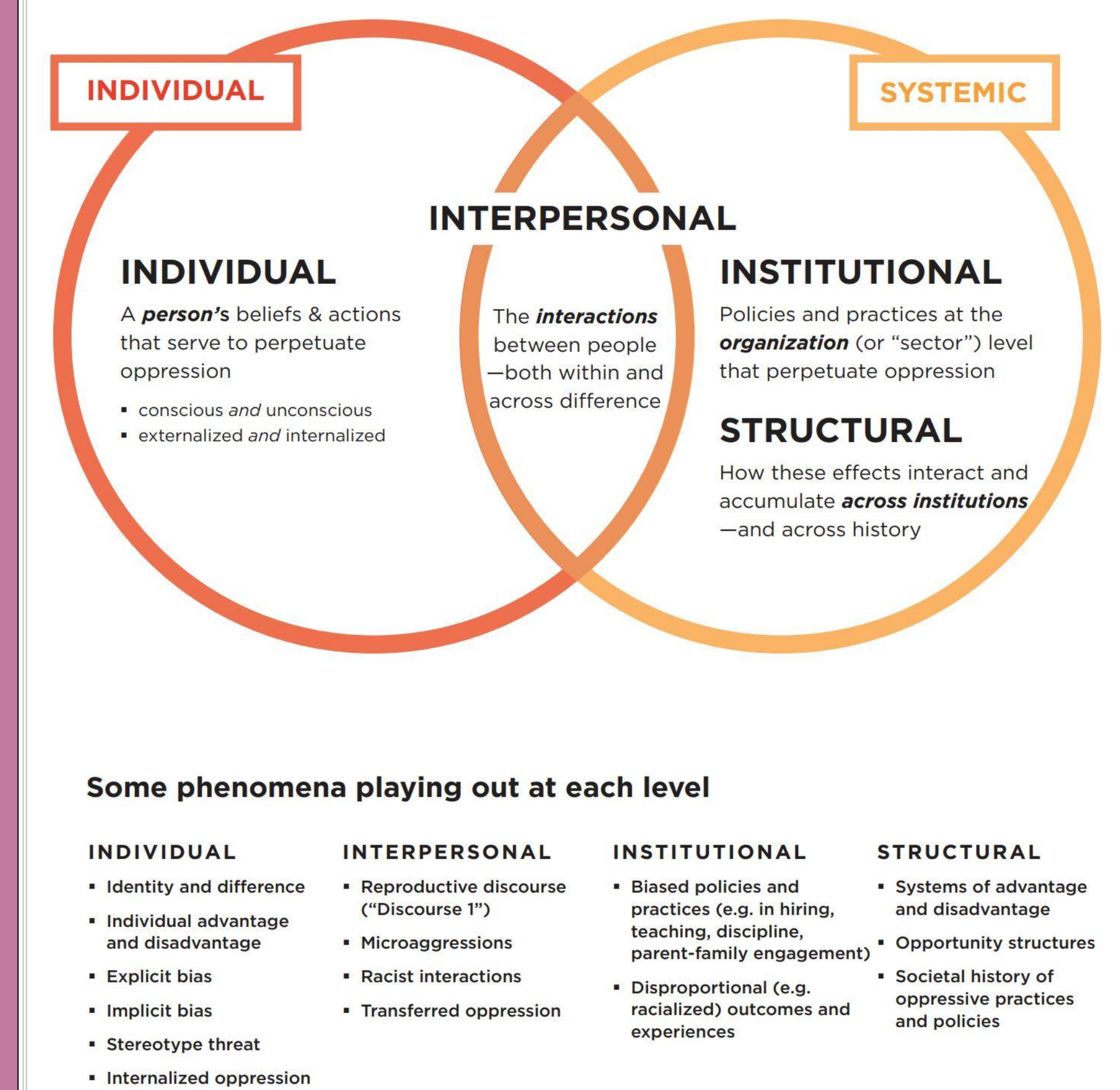


Figure 4. Lens on Systemic Oppression Graphic⁷

References/Acknowledgements

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