

Book Review

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Hannah Turner, *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020, paperback CA\$34, pp. xiv+243

Since the trustworthiness of the British Museum's custodianship has been questioned after its announcement of missing objects in August 2023, the already heated debate around the museum's management of displaced objects has become foregrounded.¹ While the museum's capability in preserving objects is being interrogated by their originating communities, it is also pivotal to re-examine how it organizes knowledge and information about these objects obtained from other cultural groups in unequal power relationships. In this respect, Hannah Turner's book *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation* is a very timely contribution to the research area. Grounded in thorough archival studies of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History's (NMNH) documentary practices, the book demystifies the historical origins of the museum's production of knowledge about First Nation objects as colonial legacies.

Museum documentation is not neutral, as it can be perceived as a discursive construction of the cultural 'Other'. And to disentangle the objects from outdated, incorrect, or even racist descriptions and categorizations, Turner usefully points out that it is important to understand how intellectual colonialism became routinized in practice and has influenced the museum's management of the object information from the past to present. She evidences in the book that rigorous bureaucratic practices permeate into the creation, classification, and standardization of the indigenous objects' documentations in the museum.

The first chapter demonstrates well how indigenous peoples' objects or even remains have been decontextualized from their cultures of origins and been reappropriated as specimens worth collecting for their usefulness to the 'scientific practice' of ethnology. The term 'Desiderata' in the chapter title stands for the desired list of things that the Smithsonian needed for developing its collection of "'natural" ethnographic specimens' (29). According to Turner, the documentation of the indigenous object information was not made with the aim of truly comprehending indigenous knowledge from a native worldview. Instead, it was driven by Western scholars' interest in collecting materials that supported the scientific investigations of the different 'mental idiosyncrasy of people' (Gibbs 1863). Using Spencer Baird's *General Directions for Collecting and Preserving Objects*² as an example, Turner shows the infiltration of racist ideas that devalued Indigenous peoples and shockingly described them as 'things' comparable to animals which contributed to the study of 'human races, civilized and uncivilized' (36). Field guides as such circulated among non-expert collectors so that they could also gather 'good data' that validated the usefulness of the objects for the museum, preparing them for future scientific research. Hence, Turner concludes that the collected objects were slotted into existing categories of knowledge predefined by the museum professionals, aligning to a Western value system rather than an indigenous one.

This point is illustrated further in the following two chapters that penetrate deeper into the use of ledger books and catalogue cards in the museum, forcing these objects to undergo the next phase of the bureaucratic record-keeping process. The objects' descriptions were entered into pre-existing fields and were then put into an index of functions, material types, etc., with the cataloguing standards reinforcing the Eurocentric classifications of the objects. This is particularly evident in Mason's classification of objects according to their functions, with an aim of 'categorizing alternative world views and objects in hierarchical and comparative schemes' (127). Turner also highlights the tensions between the ideal implementation of the

cataloguing systems in supporting a more organized ordering and indexing of indigenous objects, and how they actually functioned in practice. The backlog of documentation in the museum caused by the increasing influx of objects and staffing shortages put pressure on the Department of Anthropology staff, leading to incomplete or even incorrect object information been entered into the system. Plus, the recruitment of non-specialists to do the cataloguing work exacerbated data loss causing some of the specimens to become unlocatable in the collection. The author thus argues that the cataloguing system is both inherently incorrect and inconsistent and concludes that object catalogues are more performative than practical, as they cannot ensure that object data is properly documented and can be retrieved as expected.

The last two chapters elaborate on the computerization of the early cataloguing systems introduced in previous chapters, which stressed persisting problems. Turner found that legacy data such as incorrect or outdated descriptions of the objects, alongside offensive racist terms, were affixed to the objects when the museum catalogues were transferred to a more advanced computer system. This put more emphasis on the need to examine the history of the object data so that past wrongs could be corrected, minimizing their potential influence on future museum practices.

When talking about the Indigenous community's resistance to having their remains amassed by Western collectors, George Gibbs describes the act of protection as stemming from jealousy which, as Turner rightly puts, 'delegitimize[d] the power of the entire community' (63) in guarding their own heritage. Nevertheless, the review of the flaws and inconsistencies in museum catalogues at NMNH attest to the irony of curators and collectors to frame the indigenous community as being less capable of protecting the important 'anthropological knowledge' embedded within their objects and remains. This idea is strengthened when Turner introduces the difficulties of locating the indigenous objects within the museum's collection that need to be repatriated according to the National Museum of the American Indian Act (NMAIA)³ and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).⁴ The insufficient and inaccurate data about the objects brought about by the legacy of the museum's routine work compromised the museum's ability to provide 'accurate lists of all objects from federally recognized tribes' (174), making it hard to locate the heritage that should be repatriated. It would be better, though, if the book could include more examples that demonstrate how certain indigenous objects were defined and connected to other relevant objects from an indigenous viewpoint. This would draw the readers' attention to the simplification and misinterpretations of the objects' cultural function and value in museums.

There is one photo that Turner spotlights, which shows portraits of Native Americans witnessing how staff at the Department of Anthropology examined the textiles obtained from indigenous groups. This poignant photo demonstrates well the position of originating communities more broadly when museums catalogue their cultures: they have been muted and made powerless, all the while seeing how the meanings and functions of their objects have been distorted when entered into museum databases. Thus, Turner's approach in reclaiming the history of cataloguing as the 'internal mechanism of the museum' (189) sheds important light on how to unravel the colonial ideologies and Western epistemes that shape the museum's cataloguing schemes more broadly. I would highly recommend this book to museum professionals who work with ethnological collections as it would encourage them to re-examine their collections with fresh eyes and start to change the way they engage with these objects. It is also essential reading for anyone seeking a comprehensive understanding of the inherent cultural biases in the museum's categorization and interpretation of objects in their ethnological collection.

Notes

¹ Nadia Khomami, 'Hundreds of Items 'Missing' from British Museum since 2013', *The Guardian* 24 August 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/aug/24/hundreds-of-items-missing-from-british-museum-since-2013>, accessed 13 September 2023; Catherine Titi, 'With 2,000 Missing Objects, the British Museum Faces Historic Crisis of Custodianship, but This Case is Far from Unique', *Phys Org* 7 September 2023. <https://>

phys.org/news/2023-09-british-museum-historic-crisis-custodianship.html, accessed 13 September 2023; and Karen K. Ho, 'Stolen Items from the British Museum Worth \$64,000 Offered on eBay for As Little As \$51', ARTNews 21 August 2023. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/artifacts-stolen-british-museum-listed-ebay-1234677363/>, accessed 13 September 2023.

- ² The desiderata are referenced in Spencer Baird's *General Directions for Collecting and Preserving Objects of Natural History* published in 1848, now held by Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections. https://archives.dickinson.edu/sites/all/files/files_document/I-Friends-1975-18_0.pdf, accessed 14 January 2024.
- ³ The National Museum of the American Indian Act (NMAI Act) was enacted by the 101st United States Congress on 28 November 1989, as Public Law 101-185.
- ⁴ The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), Pub. L. 101-601, 25 U.S.C. 3001 et seq., 104 Stat. 3048, is a United States federal law enacted on 16 November 1990 by the 101st United States Congress.

References

Gibbs, G. (1863) *Instructions for Research Relative to the Ethnology and Philology of America: Prepared for the Smithsonian Institution*, Vol. 7, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

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