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**Museums and religious heritage: Post-colonial and post-socialist perspectives**

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### Felicity Bodenstein, Damiana Oțoiu & Eva-Maria Troelenberg, *Contested Holdings: Museum collections in political, epistemic and artistic processes of return*

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Felicity Bodenstein, Damiana Oțoiu & Eva-Maria Troelenberg, 2022. *Contested holdings: Museum collections in political, epistemic and artistic processes of return*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 306 p.

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This ambitious edited volume is without a doubt an important contribution to one of the key debates in cultural history and heritage today, namely: What should we do with heritage that was acquired within a context defined by unequal power relations? And what social and political potentialities are present in such collections? This edited volume by Felicity Bodenstein, Damiana Oțoiu, and Eva-Maria Troelenberg is both a *contribution* and *outcome* of this expanding discussion. Through twelve chapters by authors from across the globe, the reader is presented with a contextual grounding of issues around colonial collections and other looted heritage.

I deliberately frame this book as part of ‘a second wind’ in debates around those colonial holdings and loot found in many museums around the globe. First, I would like to acknowledge the important work and suite of publications about indigenous heritage issues published during the 1980s-1990s in the wake of the civil rights movement in the US and decolonisation in other settler societies. So, this book is not part of a ‘new’ wave of discussions, but rather part of a debate that especially in continental Europe is gaining momentum.

Second, the wealth of academic publications that were published following NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) repatriations and similar cases in Australia were key and helpful in changing the ethics in the heritage sector in those national contexts. Just like these previous publications, this book is not merely an outcome of a previous discussion, but it will also be a catalyst and should further advance the debate, especially in Europe which has been less engaged with the theme until recently.

In this volume, the editors’ main argument is that other terminology is needed, with terms that are both more specific and encompassing at the same time. To delineate all ‘things’ of art-historical, archaeological, natural, cultural-historical, and anthropological value in museums or heritage institutions, the concept of holding is introduced. This is appropriate, as it enables us to transcend the Western bifurcation between artefacts and human remains. Furthermore, it encourages an interdisciplinary discussion on different types of heritage. This is indeed a more productive concept which enables conversation amongst practitioners, and between institutions and source communities.

The second core term is ‘contested’. According to the editors, contestation relates to claims over ownership (by former owners). On the one hand, this is a strategic move to escape a too-narrow focus on colonial loot. As such, the editors want to set up a productive conversation between the colonial and looted collections, historic post-war demands for patrimony, and the expansive discussion around looted Jewish art.

At the same time, by connecting contestation with return, and more specifically the claims for return, the scope of the concept of ‘contested holdings’ is perhaps considerably narrower than the general understandings of ‘contested’.

Starting from a critical heritage perspective informed by discussion within anthropology around material culture, I would argue that objects are always contested, especially in museums. People always understand cultural things differently because their meaning is contextually assembled through an actor-network of relations. ‘Contested holding’ is thus a pleonasm: most holdings are intrinsically contested. Furthermore, contestation arises out of negotiations between actors over an item’s value and significance. The idea that dissonance leads to contestation has previously been presented in seminal publications like Sharon Macdonald’s (2009). Appropriation of museum holdings is more often than not contingent on the discourses that are associated with them or how they relate to historical narratives, and not only in relation to the aspect of physical or legal ownership. In short, I find ‘contested’ as a guiding concept too broad for the ambitions of the book.

Beyond introducing a new term to the conceptual toolkit of the museum and heritage studies scholars, multiple arguments stood out in the editors’ introduction, as well as in their conclusion. These include: the fact that we need more interdisciplinary conversations, as by acknowledging the long history of returning heritage we normalise it as a process; it is also valuable to compare colonial repatriations and returns following WWII; and the epistemic dimensions and impact of returns in museums need more attention. To all these arguments I say, with certainty: Yes! Absolutely! But unfortunately, these are rather expansive arguments that deserve lengthy intellectual consideration. The fact that the editors present these other arguments introduces an inner logical contradiction, because the incredibly important conceptual anchor point of the book, the nexus holdings-contestation-return, falls out of the limelight.

Although I thoroughly enjoyed reading each individual chapter, they did not collectively contribute to a bigger whole. Overall, there was little engagement with the central issues raised by the editors in the introduction. Some chapters, especially those from art history, did not set up a conversation with the broader contemporary debate around restitution and post-coloniality. Nonetheless, each chapter is extremely relevant and explores issues of return and contestation in a very creative and appropriate way. Moreover, the geographic diversity of the contributions brings something new to the field.

The structure of the book comprises four parts, each divided into three chapters. In the first part of the book ‘From objects back to people’, the chapter “The value of art – A human life?” by Ulrike Saß explores the meaning and experience of loss when art from Jewish owners is stolen or looted during WWII. As such, the chapter studies the social and cultural dimensions of deprivation. The next chapter, “Return as reconstruction” by Ewa Manikowska, explores the rebuilding of a synagogue and how this can also operate as a type of return. Chapter 3, “The other Nefertiti” by Root Iskin, traces how activists returned a 3D heritage object from Germany to Egypt to mediate post-coloniality.

Part Two of the book, ‘The subject of return: Between artefacts and bodies’, explores return and demands for return more deeply. In the chapter “Blurring objects”, Noémie Etienne explores the difficult material category of ethnographic plaster casts and the different perspectives that different publics connect to it. The chapter “Of phrenology, reconciliation and veneration” by Christopher Sommer similarly explores plaster casts,

and an episode in which a local museum in New Zealand mediated a repartition and underwent a series of changes to alter the colonial gaze connected to these casts. “Ancestors or artefacts” by Cressida Fforde and her co-authors studies how objects that are seen as artifacts in Europe are perceived as ancestral remains in Australia. As such the authors of these three chapters highlight the cultural differences and potential epistemic violence which museums can perpetuate when not embracing an ethical engagement.

Part Three, “The making of law’: Politics and museum ethics” studies museum politics and the attempts to institutionalise contested holdings. Chapter 7, “A long-term perspective on the issue of the return of Congolese cultural objects” by Placide Mumbembe Sanger, provides a detailed insight into the attempts to return objects to Congo from Belgium, a negotiation that already started during the late colonial period. In her contribution, “How would you like to see your great-grandfather in a museum?”, Christina Golomoz uses ethnographic research to explore how museums ethically engage with human dignity and navigate existing rules. The chapter by Damiana Oțoiu, “(De) musifying collections of physical anthropology”, traces how there are always different voices in the museum as a contact zone and is excellently positioned with post-colonial literature.

Part Five studies partial and paused returns. In “Baroque returns”, Fabrizio Federici studies deeper historical precedents of repatriations, which usually are not integrated into the existing debate. The chapter “Getting the Benin bronzes back to Nigeria”, by Felicity Bodenstein, provides a thick description of the demands and expropriation of the Benin bronzes. The final chapter of the book, “What future for looted Syrian antiquities” by Erin Thompson, provides an interesting reflection on objects currently being looted as future returns.

The fact that all chapters did not collectively tackle the same issues does not mean the book is an unguided pastiche of conference proceedings. Quite the contrary, there is a strong core of papers in the book that tie into the editors’ conceptual framework, notably the chapters by Noémie Etienne, Christopher Sommer, Cressida Fforde et al., Damiana Oțoiu, and Felicity Bodenstein.

These chapters are appropriate and fit well together because they are crafted around shared central threads. Methodologically they all, to a certain extent, embrace Pratt (1991) and Clifford’s (1997) concept of the contact zone. In doing so they explore the suite of different epistemological framings of the same ‘holding’. Importantly they all go beyond merely problematising these different understandings, and also show how an epistemological reordering can take place through return or conversations. In plain English, they explore how museums eventually (start to) decolonise through contested claims on their holdings. As Damiana Oțoiu puts it (p. 183), repatriation is not the end but the start of a process that Ariella Azoulay (2019) calls “unlearning imperialism”.

The aforementioned chapters also employ a rather positive discourse. Many explorations into colonial collections and power struggles between institutions and communities tend to be gloomy. They often do not go beyond problematising the long tentacles of colonialism and the imperial debris defining the fabric of contemporary society. The chapters in question, however, have an uplifting undertone. They show how contested holdings can be vehicles for enacting change. And, when done properly, how new relationships can be created. The South African context that Oțoiu describes, has learned to deal with its

problematic history by struggling with a collection of plaster casts. Similarly, Christopher Sommer provides us with a strong reflection on how a small museum in New Zealand dealt with a plaster cast of a local king. By following the social life of this plaster cast, and how it has become presented differently over the course of its history through co-curation with local Māori groups, Sommer shows that it is possible to recontextualise contested holdings in a museum and properly escape a colonial gaze.

Collectively these chapters significantly enrich the debate on colonial and looted collections. Besides presenting us with insightful vignettes, together they also point to the need to listen to the communities whose heritage we continue to hold in our museum. As Fforde et al. argue, these holdings “are not contentious in their original and correct cultural context” (p. 124). Only by understanding their correct cultural context can we overcome existing tensions. This quote of Fforde et al. is also significant for defining the concept of contested holdings. It shows that because of their decontextualised and unoriginal state, these holdings are already inherently contested, even if there are no demands for return. This holds a lesson, namely, that the initiative should not need to come from those communities who lost their heritage, but from museums and institutions. A proactive management of an organisation’s own collection is therefore needed, where modernist institutions as museums themselves map their own holdings and set up conversations with communities. If one acknowledges from the start that most of the holdings are contested, then one needs to tackle them.

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