
Review Essay: Changing Debates in Museum Studies since NAGPRA

Titles under review:

W. Richard West. *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures.* Washington: University of Washington Press, 2000. 119 pp. ISBN: 978-0295984599. <http://www.washington.edu/uwpress/search/books/WESCHA.html>

Maureen Matthews. *Naamiwan's Drum: the Story of a Contested Repatriation of Anishinaabe Artefacts.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 356 pp. ISBN: 978-1442650152. <https://utorontopress.com/us/naamiwan-s-drum-2>

Chip Colwell. *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 336 pp. ISBN: 9780226298993. <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo21358784.html>

Cultural politics after NAGPRA (the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) have generated a flurry of scholarly and public interest in indigenous affairs all over North America since the act was passed in USA in 1990. Covering more than simply burials, exhumations and repatriations, this historic piece of legislation was meant to provide a framework for re-assessing power imbalances between museums and indigenous North American communities, which for many decades were left out of even the most basic decisions about the fate of their cultural heritage lying in museums, storage facilities, and research laboratories. The three books here reviewed together offer an interesting snapshot of the historical contingencies that characterised subsequent phases of public and academic debates surrounding issues of repatriation, ethics of museum display, and the private/public face of these intricate matters in the period after NAGPRA, which in these volumes covers over forty years. Each of them, in its distinctive way, addresses key questions about the multiple, and often clashing, interests of the many players involved in legal negotiations and museum practice, actors who are ultimately driven by very different priorities, values, ethical principles, and distinct perspectives on the world of humans and their relationships to things.

The first of the three to be published is *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian* (2000), which focuses on images and representations, a concern typical of canonical Cultural Studies approaches of the 1990s. The second is *Namiwaan's Drum* (2016), which deals with the controversial repatriation of a ritual object to a band of Canadian Ojibwe, and the third and final one, *Plundered Skulls* (2017), concerns the politics of repatriation of both human remains and cultural objects from the perspective of an anthropologist directly involved in negotiations. The last two books radically move away from the Cultural Studies model to fully embrace anthropological theory (*Namiwaan's Drum*), and what could be a scholarly version of investigative journalism (*Plundered Skulls*).

The strategies each book takes to talk about these topics are substantially different in style, genre, and pitch. The older one is an edited collection of essays that provides an overview of different regional cases interspersed with essays of more general, and introductory nature. The

second is a solid ethnography of a repatriation case in one of Canada’s several Ojibwe bands that is strongly rooted in new theoretical and methodological approaches. The third, and most recent monograph, is an account of four cases of repatriation from different indigenous North American communities that rests on more modest theoretical premises – in fact one could say that is mostly descriptive, but instructive nonetheless.

Going chronologically, *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian* gathers papers from the homonymous symposium that happened in 1995 at the NMAI, and it is divided into six chapters. It has an introduction by Richard West (Cheyenne) former Director of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), and an afterword by Professor Richard Hill Sr. (Tuscarora) (who interestingly is not mentioned in the front page index!). Some of the essays are by indigenous authors such as curator James Nason (Comanche), member of the board of directors of the Warm Springs Museum Janice Clements (Warm Springs), and Director of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum Joycelyn Wedll (Ojibwe). The remaining papers are by non-indigenous contributors such as established curator of American Indian art David Penney, former director of Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia Professor Michael Ames (who died in 2006), and former director of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts Evan Maurer (retired in 2005).

Essays in this collection are different in length, thematic scope, and regional coverage. The book starts with a foray into visual representations of American Indians in a conventional historical trajectory that much owes to previous illustrious studies by Chiappelli, Honour, and Berkhofer, and optimistically ends with the hope that the future will take Indians outside the cabinets of curiosities, which as transpires between the lines, do not seem to be too different from museums, after all. Each of the essays has its own unique intellectual gravitas. Some papers are longer and more academic, others are short and descriptive. Seen as a collection, these contributions result as the product of a distinct historical period dominated, as it was, by the Cultural Studies paradigm. So issues of perception and representation, topical between the mid-90s through the mid-2000s, feature prominently as the guiding principles of this collection edited by the very museum in which the original symposium took place. Undoubtedly useful for the cases included in the discussion, the book exposes to the wider public concerns and ideas about now not-so-new perspectives on museology, with a deliberate emphasis on indigenous North American cultures. Examples from the Plateau region (Clements) and the Great Lakes (Wedll) fluctuate between more speculative chapters, some of which indicate how provocative questions advanced by these thinkers about issues that were relevant in the mid-90s paved the way for new themes that in later years would become as controversial and topical as the public debates on representations had been in previous decades. Michael Ames for instance alarmingly asked in his essay ‘What happens to museums when their objects becomes the speaking subject?’ Surely referring actual human persons, Native Americans as the focus of scientific enquiry, this question aimed at recovering the presence of real people behind the things that helped create cultural representations.

In an almost prophetic mode, Ames’s question anticipated the move towards a distinctively indigenous cultural activism that now presents museum professionals with an analogous question, perhaps yet more disconcerting for institutions. It is a question that, while putting “things in museums” again as the focus of enquiry, does not so much envisage them as objects of

study, but rather as active agents within negotiations. This is the idea that thoroughly permeates the second book here considered, Maureen Matthews' *Naamiwan's Drum: the Story of a Contested Repatriation of Anishinabe Artefacts*, published by University of Toronto Press sixteen years after the publication of the first but almost twenty years after the very first symposium conversations took place that eventually ended up in the NMAI book.

Naamiwan's Drum is a compelling *tour de force* across the difficult theoretical terrain that sits within the boundaries of anthropology's most recently discussed ideas: the animacy of things, and the ways in which this concept may relate to notions of personhood and agency in art circles and museums alike. Evidently proficient in navigating anthropology's intricate arguments on the matter, the author (a journalist turned anthropologist) skilfully interweaves theory with a detailed account of the adventures of an Ojibwe drum once used in the *Midewiwin* ceremonies in the nineteenth century. Aided by Ojibwe texts, Matthews builds a case for the necessity of anthropological fieldwork in museum dealings regarding repatriation. Bringing into the discussion linguistic data through translations and lengthy explanations of Ojibwe cosmological principles about animacy, action, and volition, she lodges her treatment of this complex case study in firm ethnographic evidence taking readers on a captivating journey through the various phases of what could be rightfully regarded as a *cause célèbre* of repatriation of cultural property in North America.

What this book does excellently is to uncover in subtle ways how objects *are* actors in the drama of repatriation whether one takes a First Nations' perspective or not. Readers need not be persuaded by the argument, promoted by some Indigenous groups, that things have agency, but Maureen Matthews' composed style guides us to reflect on the effects that objects have on real life situations whether one believes that drums 'choose to go home', or are taken back by human actors. Although the thorny issue of philosophical incompatibilities and the (im)possibility of building bridges between different ontologies and epistemologies outlined in this book may stay with us for a long time, the book demonstrates the relevance of fine-grained research for the recovery of dignity and pride for disenfranchised groups whose cultural heritage may reside in what Euro-American parlance are called things. The recovery of indigenous epistemologies and ontologies discussed in *Namiwaan's Drum* is just one step among the many needed to recuperate a sense of control over community lives promoted by the proverbial notion of 'self-determination' first uttered in the mid-70s under Nixon's policies, and then further endorsed by the following presidents. What this book also does is to follow the invitation of a new strand of anthropology associated with the so called 'ontological turn'; it takes indigenous views and perspectives seriously, and encourages all its readers to do the same. This is an imperative that come through very strongly in Matthews' book, one that re-orient once again anthropological practice, this time towards a new engagement with ethical issues.

Several of these issues are taken up by the third and last book published of the three. This volume addresses these current museological concerns through a passionate engagement with human remains, living statues, and once again, the utterly confused category of what most of us call 'objects'. *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture* takes the reader on a journey in time and space to appreciate the intricacy of repatriation claims, at once singular and universal. The singularity of each of the four cases brought to bear to the author's arguments is indicative of the very different views in different tribes on what

repatriation is actually *for*. Going from the Southwest to the Northwest, and from the Plains to the Southeast, Chip Colwell (curator of anthropology at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science) recounts with systematic precision the events that eventually led to the repatriation of distinct items to various indigenous communities. The cases chosen to illustrate Native North Americans’ universal concern with repatriation are: the so-called Zuni War Gods; a prestigious Tlingit blanket; Native scalps from the Great Plains; and a prehistoric skull from Florida. Clearly supportive of the claims, Colwell calls for a respectful treatment of both people (whether dead or still living), and ‘things’, which also in this book once again emerge as more than passive objects. One of the most significant contributions of the volume is its capacity to persuade outside observers that objects that are often seen as mere things are in fact bursting with life. Their power for Native Americans should thus not be underestimated in order to honour Indigenous peoples’ right to culture, and in order to offer them and their relatives a respectful, dignified, and humane treatment.

While generally sympathetic, the author presents the cases with detached objectivity, giving insightful and useful information about each instance treated in the book. Each example benefits from additional supporting material from other repatriation cases, which helps readers to contextualise the dealings in the broader framework. Overall the book is easy to read, and is accessible to a wide audience that is not accustomed to following intricate scholarly arguments. It may, on the other hand, have a very deep emotional impact, especially among those who are not familiar with Euro-American cruel, brutal, and discriminatory attitudes that have tinted much of the history of their relationships with Native Americans. Without ever descending into sensationalistic tones, the author exposes delicate facts about massacres, beliefs, desecrations, and illegal activities, deploying evidence with a measured distance that is difficult to argue against. Native American voices are given plenty of space to support their cases. They emerge as strong and determined and this is what the author wants use to perceive as a way to sensitise the public to the deep ethical implications that these, like many other cases, present us with.

All three books essentially touch upon moral and philosophical questions about agency, authority, and communication. What may be interesting, and perhaps intriguing for some readers, is that two of these books expand commonsensical ideas about these three themes, including in the discussion objects as actors. Especially the two most recent publications make abundantly clear that in indigenous North American communities objects are often seen as living entities rather than inert matter. This perspective, while paramount for claimants from the source communities, may not necessarily be adopted by museum professionals and academics working with Native North Americans. Yet, as it becomes clear reading *Plundered Skulls* and *Naamiwan’s Drum*, museum directors and curators now have to be aware of this crucial aspect of the relationship between Native Americans and what those specialists might think of as ‘objects,’ in order to conduct effectively negotiations with indigenous groups in the new regime created after NAGPRA. The three books overall convey that the new state of affairs, while generating the conditions for fresh approaches to intercultural communication, is also the source of intense debate, one that can be frequently tinted by heartfelt reactions from both sides. Luckily, at least one of the three books (*Naamiwan’s Drum*) avoids facile polarizations, by presenting the multiplicity of voices that make up the cacophony of positions taken by the many individual and institutional actors involved in the debates over objects’ repatriation. Although different

viewpoints are obvious in the other two books, the implications these have for negotiations are left more implicit, whereas in *Naamiwan's Drum* they are the core of the matter.

Irrespective of the level of explicitness of such arguments, one could say that all three books are fundamentally about the status that things and persons, however loosely conceptualised, have in museums. *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian* however stands in stark contrast to the two later books because its treatment of things is firmly articulated around the idea that objects are functions of cultural representations, or at best metaphors, or symbols for other places and times (Penney). Early conversation of the role of objects in museums did not touch upon the animacy of objects, possibly because research about this fundamental aspect of Native philosophies had not been thoroughly investigated, and certainly was outside Cultural Studies' main concerns and expertise. It took academia and museums years to absorb the lessons derived from anthropological work on these matters, and the latter volumes show the effects of this important shift on twenty-first century's cultural climate.

Whatever areas these early debates left untouched, they were historically necessary. Postcolonial critiques of museum approaches to things came from literary and Cultural Studies that ultimately interpreted cultural facts as texts to be decoded along power axes that operate on the continuum between hegemonic and subaltern positions. As a result, the *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian*, recently reissued by the University of Washington Press, now reads and feels like it belongs to a former period in which criticism centred round notions of representations and resistance, one that however tended to polarise positions in antagonistic competitions over the right name and represent. As such, this book should now be treated as a document of, or as reference for, the historical developments of repatriation debates over its long history.

Although sharing the overarching theme of things in museums, the three books provide different perspectives of what a 'thing' is and does, and this is probably the most significant contribution to museological literature produced today. Whereas things in *The Changing Presentation* are instrumental in eliciting questions about the authority to speak for entire communities and worldviews, in the two later books things are understood in their ontological complexities across linguistic registers and worldviews. Readers will learn that whether displayed or reclaimed, perceived as things or 'other-than-human' beings, objects are the main characters in the three books' stories. Two of the books (*Plundered Skulls*, and *Naamiwan's Drum*), explicitly make the theme of objects' agency and personhood the core of their most poignant arguments about repatriation, ethics, and conservation. Upon reflection, what is at stake for all the three is the ability of certain arguments to convince, and in so doing, to allow the wider public to understand indigenous peoples' world views and perspectives on material culture, heritage, and more specifically what Euro-Americans understand as objects. If properly contextualised, these three volumes can lift Native North American world views from epistemological oblivion to the limelight of intense philosophical ponderings common nowadays among museum curators, directors, and conservators dealing with indigenous communities. Truly, if we see the three books together as signposts of historical changes in museums' attention to indigenous claims, we can see their collective value as opposed to what they can each contribute to the current debates in their own right. Seen in chronological perspective, the cases described in the three books mark subsequent epistemological shifts by means of salient examples from Zuni requests for their

sacred items in the 1970's (*Plundered Skulls*), to *Naamiwan's Drum's* monographic treatment of a divisive dispute over ritual implement between different Ojibwe groups in the mid-2000s.

In highlighting different viewpoints, rhetorical strategies, discursive, and epistemological domains embraced by the various constituencies, the three books not only put in sharp focus the difficulties in entertaining efficient inter-cultural communication, but underline the crucial issue of fragmentation of knowledge, authority, cultural competence, and language proficiency among indigenous constituencies. What surfaces from the reading of these books is that far from being homogeneous entities, tribes, linguistic groups, and urban communities are extremely diverse. What the books highlight however, is that repatriation claims and controversies over the treatment of indigenous cultural material are further complicated by the uneven perceptions of the same matters among museum specialists. The different levels of accommodation of repatriation claims by various institutions is, in fact, evident in *Plundered Skulls*. What is more, and this is probably one of the most relevant points for all the three books, each constituency holds a different view on what museums are and they are supposed to do. This obviously has implications for museum policies and protocols, which ideally ought to be flexible enough to be able to contingently adapt to the multiplicity of scenarios presented by the extreme heterogeneity of indigenous communities. In addition to being a warning to museum practitioners, consultants, and collectors, the three books collectively stress the role of indigenous agency in reshaping decision making processes over the repatriation of objects. Or, readers are left to wonder, is it the objects themselves that are now finally asking ‘to go back home’?

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