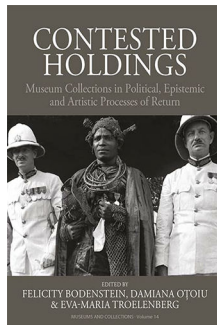


FELICITY BODENSTEIN, DAMIANA
OŌTOIU, AND EVA-MARIA
TROELENBERG (EDS.), *CONTESTED
HOLDINGS. MUSEUM COLLECTIONS
IN POLITICAL, EPISTEMIC AND
ARTISTIC PROCESSES OF RETURN*

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Reviewed by
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The volume *Contested Holdings. Museum Collections in Political, Epistemic and Artistic Processes of Return* contributes to the enduring discussions surrounding the snarl in which museums holding queried material culture find themselves. The 360-page book emphasizes the importance of addressing historical injustices and unethical practices within these institutions, highlighting the need to implement efficient and effective resolutions. *Contested Holdings* explores various geographical locations and contexts. With twelve chapters, this publication provides a polymathic range towards understanding the diverse occurrences of contested collections and the repatriation of human remains across five continents. This includes the examination of constitutional frameworks, knowledge systems, and the artistic aspects of ongoing contestations and prospective returns. The editors' deliberate decision to employ the phrase “contested holdings” in place of “heritage” and “return” instead of “restitution” aligns with Piotr Bienkowski’s elucidation

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of “return”, which encompasses two distinct actions: restitution, which pertains to the return of items to their rightful owners based on property rights, and repatriation, which involves “a return of items to their country or sub-state group based on ethical considerations”.¹ Additionally, the editors reference Jeanette Greenfield’s inclination towards using the term “return” to encompass a wide range of case studies and diplomatic legal actions that may result in either restitution or repatriation (p. 1). This decision capably captures the complexity and specificity of the cases presented throughout the book.

Structured into four thematic sections, *Contested Holdings* is organized as follows: “Transitioning from Objects to People. Investigating Ways of Life and Loss”, “Investigating the Idea of Return. Connecting Artefacts and Bodies”, “Establishing Regulations. Discussing Politics and Museum Ethics”, and “Returns That Are Incomplete and Interrupted”. The publication’s editors deserve commendation for the meticulously structured framework that enables a smooth transition from one topic to another, guaranteeing a coherent presentation of various arguments. Despite unavoidable overlaps, this careful arrangement significantly improves the overall reading experience. Although these section headings provide a broad overview of the content, this review offers more granular analyses of individual articles within these themes.

I. From Objects Back to People. Ways of Life and Loss

This section spotlights the aftermath of the Second World War, a critical period confronting the historical injustices surrounding Nazi-looted art and its repatriation. Ulrike Sass’s contribution shows how these artistic possessions were once regarded as mere objects but are now recognized for their pivotal role in safeguarding lives. It underscores the importance of acknowledging the intrinsic value of these masterpieces to both the victims from whom they were cruelly snatched and those who perpetrated the act. The chapter accentuates how the meticulous documentation of history can significantly contribute to comprehending the circumstances surrounding their acquisition. Within the scope of negotiations pertaining to Nazi-looted art, Sass effectively demonstrates the significance of having a comprehensive understanding of the interventions involved, as confiscation is intrinsically intertwined with the notions of restoration and reparation. By examining various cases of barter trade involving humans and art, Sass explores the historical precedent of hostage-taking and the devaluation of human life as a mere commodity. The appalling public exhibition of the deprivation of rights inflicted upon Jewish individuals during the era of National

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See Piotr Bienkowski, A Critique of Museum Restitution and Repatriation Practices, in: Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy (eds.), *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, vol. 3, Chichester 2015, 431–453.

Socialism brings forth a heightened awareness of the clandestine exchange of artworks for human lives, which can be perceived as a distinct form of ransom and extortion.

In a different scenario, Ewa Manikowska utilizes the Gwoździec synagogue replica in the Museum of History of Polish Jews as a case study to explore strategies for coping with the loss of traditional Jewish ways of life within a museum setting. According to Manikowska, the museum itself carries the tragic history of the Holocaust, and the synagogue replica goes beyond being a mere faithful reconstruction of a specific structure. It also symbolizes the revival of European Jewish heritage and the Jewish community, made possible through the tangible remnants of culture. Manikowska highlights the significance of Eastern European synagogues, particularly those built with wood, as potent symbols in the ongoing process of rehabilitating and reconstructing Jewish culture since the aftermath of the Second World War. This chapter underscores the importance of material culture in facilitating the reconstruction of Jewish heritage and exemplifies a museum's role in cultural rehabilitation and reconstruction processes.

Ruth E. Iskin's contribution highlights the latent limitations of relying solely on a postcolonial perspective in negotiations about restitution, as it risks overlooking a more comprehensive understanding of the object's history and the complexities surrounding its ownership. This approach tends to disregard the inimitable circumstances of dispossession and fails to acknowledge the various forms of appropriation. Iskin follows the life of the *Nefertiti* bust, beginning at the point of its excavation in 1912 and extending to its current controversial existence in Germany. The controversies surrounding the bust have sparked an artistic intervention by Nora Al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles, resulting in the creation of *The Other Nefertiti*, a provocative gesture that revitalizes the polemic surrounding the original bust. Here, the potency of contemporary art in engaging with this discourse on restitution in a stimulating manner, both digitally and materially, is illustrated. The utilization of art in the digital age to establish a distinctive intervention in the discourse surrounding restitution presents "a series of symbolic acts, [and] this intervention not only contests colonial cultural dispossession, but it also symbolically enacts a repossession" (p. 75). By conjoining restitution politics with internet activism, the symbolic value of the original masterpiece through three-dimensional replicas is effectively harnessed, thereby raising pertinent questions about the contemporary geopolitics of cultural ownership from a postcolonial standpoint.

II. The Subject of Return. Between Artefacts and Bodies

Recently, a significant amount of attention has been allotted to the debate surrounding the boundaries between museum specimens and human individual bodies. The fate of old physical anthropologi-

cal collections created by racial anthropologists and phrenologists for their scientific projects continues to be critically scrutinized. These collections are mostly now considered outdated and potentially harmful in representing specific individuals or groups. As a result, there are growing debates regarding who has the legal rights to keep these collections. Noémie Étienne highlights the growing discomfort associated with displaying life casts in museums through the examination of specific instances where life casts were used to construct life-size dioramas, raising questions about how the provenance of such collections can be remedied. The status of live casts and their moulds as scientific artefacts containing traces of human DNA should be worrying as “some plaster moulds literally include human remains” (p. 88). Through the analyses of the works of anthropologist Arthur C. Parker and sculptor Casper Mayer, Étienne stresses that “the context of violence, domination and colonization in which most casts in anthropological enterprises of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were produced is often visible in the cast themselves” (p. 91).

In a similar vein, Christopher Sommer conducts a thorough examination of the repatriated life cast of Māori chief Takatahara at the Akaroa Museum, a biography that sheds light on the chief's story and brings together its various encounters such as displaying the life cast amongst artefacts from different periods and origins, thereby ascribing it another context. Questions of how and when these live casts make their way back to the communities of the indigenous population studied by phrenologists in the nineteenth century emerge. While dioramas undoubtedly provide a distinctive approach to captivate viewers and deepen their comprehension of a specific subject by immersing them in a scaled-down world, they have gained notoriety for depicting indigenous peoples in unfavourable infrahuman portrayals. As per Sommer's analysis,

given that dioramas are a common way of representing animals in the Natural History collections, this could even have suggested a zoo environment, with the representation of Maori restrained behind a barrier and expected to perform his daily deeds for the pleasure of the curious onlooker (p. 103).

To honour the historical significance of dioramas while avoiding any potential offence, it is requisite to explore alternative symbolic representations, as suggested by Étienne. We must acknowledge that presenting scenarios and objects in vitrines can unintentionally create a sense of otherness. It is imperative to discover non-offensive formats that effectively convey the historical value of these dioramas.

An elemental aspect of this section involves the ethical considerations surrounding museums' possession of human remains that are considered ancestors by the communities from which they originated. One notable instance is the Pitt Rivers Museum, which,

despite repatriating Aboriginal Ancestral Remains, continued to retain the Ngarrindjeri Old people, symbolically “represented as drinking vessels” (p. 124). What is most urgent is addressing the ethical implications of preserving and displaying these human remains. Persuasively, the contributors illustrate the imperative to strike a delicate balance between honouring the scientific advancements of the past and respecting the dignity and rights of those whose remains are held within museum collections.

III. “The Making of Law”. Politics and Museum Ethics

The chapters in this section are connected by an exploration of museum ethics in relation to various requests for the return of human remains and objects from colonial collections, such as those tied to the complex and aggressive history of Belgian-Congolese relations, characterized by ambiguity and conflict. Placide Mumbembele Sanger illustrates the highly politicized litigation against Belgium for Congolese objects in the Museum of Tervuren, highlighting why the Tervuren collections are significant in this renowned legal battle. Sanger accentuates the importance of the Congolese people rediscovering their past and asserting their identity, describing the collection not only as a representation of

a sumptuous and impressive royal palace; [but] also a great ‘cemetery’ where the masterpieces of our ancestors, torn from their environment and diverted from their function, are buried. Desacralized, they have become mere objects of curiosity, reduced to the role of consumer goods (p. 158).

The ensuing chapter offers a peek into how French museums tackle (or at least attempt to tackle) the troublesome issue of human remains and the legal and moral considerations surrounding their repatriation. According to Cristina Golomož, the history of repatriation claims involving human remains from French museums demonstrates that the legal classification of these remains is not fixed. Instead, it fluctuates between two perspectives. On the one hand, human remains can be seen as objects that can be owned and are protected by property laws. On the other, human remains can be understood in relation to the human body they once belonged to. An illustrative case is that of Saartjie Baartman, whose remains were returned from France to South Africa in 2002 after a lengthy legal process. Damiana Oțoiu also examines the Baartman case from the perspective of South Africa, providing an overview of legal classifications of human remains and their significance in diplomatic relations concerning repatriation.

The presence of human remains in museums brings to light the intricate relationship between cultural property law, ethical principles, and the evolving perceptions regarding the dignity of these artefacts. The contributions demonstrate the intricate web

that museum professionals must navigate when managing their collections, balancing the demands of cultural property law and moral responsibilities in the face of repatriation claims. In addition, this section also focuses on scientific racism linked to the significance of physical anthropology collections, which have long served as repositories for human remains considered scientific specimens. However, as examined in the preceding section, ancestral remains are now acknowledged as concrete traces that unveil narratives of colonial viciousness and the objectification of indigenous populations by racial anthropologists. This cannot be over-flogged.

IV. Partial and Paused Returns

The previous sections presented numerous examples of returns or requests that were either compelled or coerced as a result of various legal conflicts. Interestingly, the opening chapter in this section delves deeper into the past, specifically on the Counter-Reformation era of sixteenth-century Rome. During this time, the Catholic Church faced challenges and implemented a series of reforms to restore its influence and authority. One individual who played a significant role in this period was Francesco Gualdi, who actively contributed to the restoration efforts by returning objects from his collection to “*loca sacra*”, where they could be admired as expressions of faith. Fabricio Federici argues that Gualdi’s decision to restore these objects to churches and public spaces was motivated by various factors, including his ambition for self-promotion and desire for recognition. This inclination towards self-promotion was not unique to Gualdi, as many benefactors during that era shared similar motivations. Consequently, Gualdi took great care to ensure that his name was prominently displayed on the pieces that he returned, thereby solidifying his legacy, and leaving a lasting mark on these objects. While it may be temporally separated from other entries in the volume, this specific contribution presents a viewpoint from a private holder rather than an institutional one.

Within Chapter 11, Felicity Bodenstein’s contribution brings valuable insights into the fervent political and legal debates surrounding the repatriation of Benin bronzes to Nigeria. By focusing on the art market, the establishment of national collections, and the concept of heritage in Benin and Lagos, this chapter adds depth to the extant controversies.² Bodenstein unravels the labyrinthine history surrounding the calls for the return of the looted Benin artefacts during the punitive expedition by British naval forces in 1897. A staggering 5,246 objects from this plunder are currently dispersed

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Substantiating contributions are Dan Hicks, *British Museums. The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*, London 2020; Barnaby Phillips, *Loot. Britain and the Benin Bronzes*, London 2022.

among 131 institutions, excluding those held privately.³ The chapter sheds light on the complex interplay between actors in Benin and the national efforts to seek restitution during the colonial and postcolonial periods. Throughout, various endeavours are traced, including diplomatic appeals between governments, repurchasing private collections for the state, and appealing to the voluntary willingness of holders to restore these objects to Nigeria. The contribution also highlights the significant rise in the monetary value of Benin objects, which has hindered the return efforts. Beyond their cultural and spiritual significance, these objects have gained immense value in the “tribal art” market, fetching some of the highest prices ever recorded internationally for African artefacts (p. 238).

Carrying on with cases of loot acquired from warfare, Erin Thompson’s inquiry into the legal and political consequences of artefacts trapped in transitional phases during military conflicts adds substantially to the discourse.⁴ The effort to repatriate archaeological discoveries to Iraq and Syria reveals the convoluted legal jurisdiction that operates domestically within the United States and internationally. This section stands as a testament to the numerous obstacles surrounding objects confiscated from dealers or illicit sales, many of which were initially circulated through networks affiliated with ISIS. Thompson’s investigation particularly highlights the contrasting treatment of artefacts believed to have originated from Iraq as opposed to those likely originating from Syrian territory, underscoring how prevailing political dynamics can supersede established legal norms.

While *Contested Holdings* aims to present a comprehensive portrayal of disputed holdings, it is understandable that due to the sheer volume of cases worldwide, certain regions did not make it into the compilation – perhaps in a subsequent volume. The absence of previously colonized areas like South America and Asia, where the illicit transfer of cultural artefacts and human remains was prevalent and continues to be entangled in various restitution cases, is notable. As an anthropologist, I am aware of the dangers of historical repetition, imbalanced power dynamics, and the significance of facilitating “intercultural translation”, collaboration, and productive dialogue between different forms of knowledge. Therefore, spotting indigenous Ngarrinjeri elders, Major Sumner and Loretta Sumner,

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It is important to note that these figures are based on the declarations made by institutions on the [Digital Benin](#) platform, and there may be additional artefacts yet to be accounted for (23 January 2024).

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Benjamin Isakhan and James Barry, Iraqi and Syrian Responses to Heritage Destruction Under the Islamic State. Genocide, Displacement, Reconstruction, and Return, in: José Antonio González Zarandona, Emma Cunliffe, and Melathi Saladin (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Heritage Destruction*, London 2023, 322–332; Helga Turku, *The Destruction of Cultural Property as a Weapon of War. Isis in Syria and Iraq*, London 2018.

as co-authors of Chapter 6 titled “Ancestor or Artefacts”, was gratifying. In this context, intercultural translation acts as a catalyst for initiating and facilitating the exchange of challenges and uncertainties, ultimately leading to the discovery of hidden knowledge within indigenous contexts and a profound understanding of the intricate dynamics of power. This is a noteworthy highlight.

As institutions supposedly dedicated to cultivating intellectual development and promoting cross-cultural exchange, museums with contested holdings reflect the colonial past and the intricate dynamics of cultural maltreatment and “cultural haemorrhaging”⁵ that unveils the unsettling reality of the political dimensions of power and authority within these museums. Hence, this publication further substantiates the intensifying evidence that such museums have caused harm (and continue to cause harm) to various societies and individuals by monopolizing and claiming ownership of their alleged knowledge repositories, often misrepresenting the histories, traditions, and unique attributes of diverse communities.

Contested Holdings makes a refreshing and invaluable contribution to the rolling discussions surrounding restitution and reparations. The editors have successively produced a comprehensive and invaluable resource – a volume anchored to the sturdy groundwork of the contributors’ meticulous and exhaustive research.

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Folarin Shyllon, Unraveling History. Return of African Cultural Objects Repatriated and Looted in Colonial Times, in: James A. R. Nafziger and Ann M. Nicgorski (eds.), *Cultural Heritage Issues. The Legacy of Conquest, Colonization and Commerce*, Leiden/Boston 2010, 159–168.