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Museums, Heritage, and Representation

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10 October 2021

Critically assess the extent that repatriation claims are motivated by political agendas of self-determination and sovereignty.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary discussions on heritage have begun to place a significant focus on the subject of repatriation. While most of the debate today has moved beyond whether or not repatriation is necessary, there remains notable discourse regarding the particulars in its eventual implementation. As might be expected, this is a demanding topic to properly address because repatriation claims are never exactly the same. In fact, each individual request entails investigating relevant contextual information on the particular circumstances for that heritage piece, which understandably creates for a troublesome foundation where universal inconsistencies concerning human rights and cultural property fail to function in the way they need to. With that in mind, it is imperative to realize that the complexities in opinions within the international conversation on repatriation vary immensely and are predictably influenced by national politics and socio-cultural agendas.

This holds true for various branches of heritage, including the collection process, a prime example of how ethical issues interconnect with western expectations in how to preserve the past. Truthfully, an upsurge in the desire for repatriation efforts should be expected in the wake of post-imperial nations and the widespread demand for accountability. Naturally, repatriation claims are motivated to a large extent by political agendas of self-determination and sovereignty, but it should be noted that this does nothing to take away from the argument and fails to account for the very real nuance behind repatriation claims. In this essay I will provide a critical evaluation of this statement, as well as a thorough assessment of contemporary discourse surrounding repatriation as whole in order to allow for a deeper understanding of the topic itself.

CONTEMPORARY HERITAGE COLLECTION

The global debate on repatriation claims presents a diverse array of proposals for the necessary means by which repatriation should be executed, as well as whether the most effective option for this requires international regulation to maintain orderly modes of action.

Unfortunately, settling on an answer to the question of how repatriation should be carried out necessitates both the world heritage community and a multitude of Indigenous communities to come to an understanding with each other on how the past should be honored. Of course, coming to a mutually agreed upon solution is an unsurprisingly difficult task considering the diverse groups of people that take part in this decision. In any case, this has worked to highlight how the most pressing disagreements have less to do with a difference of opinions and more to do with a clear rift in world views, therefore affecting priorities in how they choose to handle the past.

This is made apparent in how archaeologists and historians prioritize protection of heritage artifacts on archaeological sites yet fail to understand how the Indigenous' perception of protection may differ from theirs, causing tensions to rise out of overt misunderstandings. Archaeologists then unintentionally add fuel to the fire because they "have substantial power over resources associated with the cultural history of Indigenous people, and members of descendent communities often feel powerless about what happens to their ancestors and the archaeological sites associated with them" (Watkins 2003, 275). Watkins (2003) goes on to illustrate that "because of this power differential, archaeologists often are perceived to be arrogant and insensitive by native people, while at the same time native people often are perceived to be antagonistic toward archaeological research" (Watkins 2003, 275). Looking at this objectively, it seems inane, but it has festered for generations and, supported by centuries of exploitation and injustice, the reality of the situation is nothing less than tragic and the fault lies rather obviously on the side of the oppressor. Unless there is a clear willingness to impose actual lasting change, Indigenous people "will continue to feel like outsiders in a system supposedly designed to protect their heritage" (Watkins 2003, 283).

Regrettably, contemporary heritage has been commodified through new museology and, subsequently, has contributed to the trivializing of Indigenous struggles and their past. This is evident in museum collections, which have become little more than "a site of tourism performance', where the production and consumption of the tourist space is a contingent and mutually constitutive process influenced by 'economies of culture'" (Kreps 2011, 1513). People enjoy seeing how others live, but the prospect of the 'other' as referring to peoples in the past or

cultures someone is not a part of prescribes a need to make an attraction rather than an accurate representation, creating a scenario destined to produce a false narrative. Jones (1993) comments on “the contrived image of the past as manufactured by the heritage industry,” alluding to this exact misrepresentation and thus bringing light to the unintentional blurring of cultural history (Jones 1993, 573). It goes without saying that any form of heritage sheds light onto the group from which it came, acting as both individual and socio-cultural identity markers that contribute to how national histories are redefined. Heritage has no say in its interpretation, therefore inevitably adding to an atmosphere that reflects a specific version of history: that which is crafted by the authority figure of that time and then reinterpreted through the lens of the authority bias who discovered it (Bessiere 1998; Hall 2008).

Shared cultural heritage creates for opportunities in which Indigenous peoples can reclaim and form stronger connections with their past, and as a result, reshape their current identity as well. Because heritage plays such a significant role in defining the past, and consequently, impacting the perception of particular groups of people in the present, developing a strong grasp on the heritage process is essential in recognizing where it can go wrong. Meskell (2010) presents an impressive deduction on the state of current heritage claim exchanges: “rights discourse and the inherent tensions between rights universalism and cultural specificity, transnational governance and respect for local law and practice, not to mention the potentials for universal rights to be a mechanism for new colonialism, hegemony’s, and interventions, have prompted many theorists to call for an ontological shift” (Meskell 2010, 853). Cultural heritage itself, because of its relationship to influencing group identity, must be approached with regard to human rights, but just as Meskell (2010) notes, there is no universal definition of what that entails, causing for an entirely new topic to be added to contemporary heritage discourse. The current state of which has become entrenched in various political agendas that often refuse to listen to alternative perspectives, achieving nothing in terms of progressing toward an open-minded and forward-thinking future.

CULTURAL PROPERTY AND COLONIALISM

Addressing the matter of what exactly counts as cultural property as well as who is allowed to claim ownership of it necessitates looking at heritage from a postcolonial lens. Western colonialism worked to stirp Indigenous cultures of their heritage, and despite it being

part of the past, continues to serve its purpose today due to its substantial influence on the origin of heritage studies. Those in the heritage business today should, then, be working to rectify this injustice by mending the tense relationship they have with Indigenous populations. Needless to say, this demands a genuine and willing shift in power to Indigenous peoples, giving them the voice to determine how their heritage should be treated.

History, and therefore heritage, holds such value because of its ability to connect people today to a distant or forgotten past, shedding light on a shared sense of cultural unity. In fact, Meskell (2010) notes that “cultural heritage participates in individual and community identity-building and cohesion” (Meskell 2010, 845). One of biggest contributors to the growing insistence on preservation works is gaining knowledge on the past in order to make connections between then and now. The entire prospect of heritage is inherently intertwined with the concept of identity, ergo it should come as no surprise that heritage strengthens and rekindles personal ties to group cultural identity, and that many pieces hold special significance for the descendants of heritage makers. This being the case, when it comes to discussing the details of relinquishing authority over heritage pieces, ideally “heritage rights would include rights of self-determination and expression, rights of access and management, rights of veto, and rights to accrued benefits” (Meskell 2010, 842). When it is deconstructed like this, heritage is revealed to be intensely personal while simultaneously offering knowledge that contributes to the gigantic unfinished puzzle that is humanities past. Although those who study the past do, to a certain extent, have the right to inquire about new heritage and use their resources to examine and preserve said heritage, they still should not have the largest say in how that heritage should be dealt with because despite their job, what they study does not belong to them.

There is an understandable push, then, for Indigenous peoples to gain increased active agency in this field. Of course, one method of undergoing this process is through urging their own political agendas to gain international recognition and respect, and subsequently the right to self-determination and sovereignty. In a way, these goals are inherent to the notion of heritage because of its natural ties to cultural identity and, with this in mind, it seems rather evident who has rightful ownership and claim to cultural property. However, especially in a world controlled by nations with more power and sway, and particularly when these groups exist within the borders of said nations, issues in claiming that ownership are bound arise. This is apparent in the treatment of Indigenous peoples by the United States, in which Indigenous tribes are recognized

as “domestic dependent nations that retain sovereign powers” (Watkins 2003, 276). Because they reside within the country, they are dependent on the federal government, but their claim to the heritage of the land is not only recognized but respected, and those who wish to study their past must work with them. Needless to say, it was not always like this, and there should remain a critical eye on the power imbalance that lies here considering the Indigenous populations within the United States are still not given much voice in other matters regarding their well-being, even after being put through centuries of what is largely deemed to be cultural cleansing and forced assimilation (Kramer 2004). While this is only one example, it displays a pattern for many Indigenous-Archaeologist relations today where past colonial abuse of power has shifted to current power imbalances while hiding behind a façade of good intentions.

The act of collecting today is conceptualized as a fundamentally western construct (Mukerji 1997). Hall (2008) discusses how, historically, collections have been, both directly and indirectly, correlated with shows of power, authority, and even status, which makes perfect sense when critically analyzing the act of collecting within the context of a colonial past. For centuries, there has been a “systematic and institutionalized collecting” of heritage artifacts, buildings, and even ancestral remains; Unsurprisingly, this has had a less than ideal effect on the cultures being taken advantage of, who “have experienced various degrees of physical, cultural, material and emotional estrangement within and across generations” (Krmpotich 2010, 161, 165). It is for this reason that there needs to be a wider understanding that just because we don’t see imperialism and colonialism to same extent today, does not mean that the global community does not still experience its effects, both on the community and personal level due to generational trauma. In addition to this, the physical leftovers of colonialism are still extremely prevalent within the heritage industry today, especially in regard to how “the institutional structures of world heritage have become the media through which a Eurocentric” version of Indigenous “history and culture are [now] seen and understood” (Kreps 2011, 1512). Our approach to heritage has remained stagnant, meaning that the former and existing modes of addressing history have and still do reflect “Eurocentric and neo-colonial” perceptions of the past (Kreps 2011, 1512).

Moreover, this discloses an unfortunate reality about contemporary heritage and the often disguised yet pervasive presence neo-colonial dogma has in this field of work. In the face of effectively addressing repatriation, the emerging difficulties are giving rise to a focus on the extent to which this is affecting the heritage industry at a foundational level. More specifically,

this can be observed after “nations demand the return of art treasures when they [gain] sovereignty and are no longer subject to imperial control” (Singh 2010, 133). Does this make repatriation a form of rebellion, then, against imperial ideology due to the goal of regaining agency over historical and socio-cultural status on a global scale? In any case, the presence of colonial and imperial ideology in the current heritage world is perpetuating destructive and oppressive behaviors, and recognizing this is the first step in beginning to deconstruct and eliminate it.

REPATRIATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Repatriation efforts today, though they have witnessed a progression in the right direction whilst more people are beginning to succeed in instituting this on a larger scale, are not where they need to be quite yet. There still remains critical debate over how effective reparation efforts will be, as well as what kind of lasting effects it may have on heritage and contemporary museum culture as a whole. Albeit well-founded worries, they neglect to place priority on those that warrant it most, the Indigenous. For this reason, legitimate worry presents itself in the question of whether there is any actual, genuine accountability being taken in the repatriation process, or if it has become a ‘do the bare minimum to get these people to stop hassling us already’ situation? When discussing repatriation, it is vital to acknowledge that “indigenous issues are paramount: there must be restitution and reparation, and archeology must actively participate in these accommodations,” no matter their personal bias (Meskell 2010, 851).

As briefly mentioned before, claims for repatriation tend to gain traction in post-imperial nations. Such requests “really escalated in the wake of decolonization” after the World Wars, but even then, they were “seldom met with success” (Singh 2010, 132). Despite how unmotivating this may have been, recent decades have demonstrated an increase in repatriation efforts on behalf of national museums that hold heritage not belonging to them, Canada with the First Nations, and the United States with Indigenous Americans as prime examples. Most claims being answered, however, are addressing ancestral remains more so than artifacts or buildings since the question of ownership is less difficult to provide an answer for in that scenario (Deloria 1992; Watkins 2003). For the reasons discussed above, the act of repatriation is more often than not associated with and catalogued in terms of the “postcolonial process of self-determination and self-representation,” except that is not entirely the case for certain other situations

(Krmopotich 2010, 157). Krmopotich (2010) explores the sincere actuality that repatriation can also serve as “an expression of kinship and as a means of producing collective memory and identity” (Krmopotich 2010, 157). The concept of repatriating then acts as a point of intersection between representing heritage pieces which reflect a wider cultural identity, and providing an outlet for these cultural communities to build and redefine their group identity through the act of receiving and honoring a lost past. Accordingly, then producing an outlet for this to “occur in way not always dominated by pain or sadness,” which is an unfortunate reality in post-colonial nations recovering from widespread collective trauma (Krmopotich 2010, 168).

In spite of the already grievous past between Indigenous peoples and collectors, more tensions have risen as a result of thoughtless misunderstandings and previously held bias. Deloria (1992) sums this dynamic up rather evidently in that the Indigenous “were made to appear as if they were looting the scientific heritage instead of receiving back the remains of loved ones who had been illegally and immorally taken from them a century or more ago” (Deloria 1992, 596). Deloria (1992) is referring specifically to human remains as heritage, and although there has been a gradual shift away from this ignorant mode of thought, it is not unfounded for archaeologists to prioritize the physical heritage over the people it comes from.

Nevertheless, clever examples for alternative ways to keep consistent with the essence of repatriation have been explored more recently. One such method includes what is known as figurative repatriation, where Indigenous “artists can regain control of their material cultural objects by locating political artworks in western spaces as metaphorical acts of self-definition” (Kramer 2004, 172). This proves beneficial because it allows for accountability to be taken through another form of reparation, which has the potential to be more widely accepted and utilized in situations where physical repatriation is not necessarily a viable option. Another alternative is presented with The New York Tibet House, a museum that functions specifically as a repatriation collection for Tibetan art, essentially acting as a substitute to hold such heritage items until it is safe to repatriate them once Tibet is free (Singh 2010). This alternative “invokes the idea of repatriation in an extraordinarily powerful way,” showing obvious respect for its origins and stating its clear purpose as working for and prioritizing the Tibetan people and their heritage (Singh 2010, 145).

CONCLUSION

Even though this does not paint a complete picture of the nuances within the international conversation around repatriation, the fact remains that political agendas based in self-determination and sovereignty play a large role in the motivation behind many contemporary repatriation claims, especially in reference to heritage and cultural property. As touched on previously, however, Indigenous peoples have every right to their cultural heritage. The connotations surrounding political agendas as means for regaining control over an historical narrative, though slightly uneasy from an outside perspective due to the similarity in nationalist lexicon, actually serves to make the argument that much more gripping. This highlights a compelling desire to be included in international historical and archeological debate in addition to having Indigenous voices be heard and respected on a global level.

Constructively addressing the past and working to amend the heritage museum industry at its core requires a re-evaluation of its foundation and an active push to recreate the way we as a society approach the past. Meskell (2010) provides a clear understanding of how far behind we are as a community in properly addressing this, stating that “at present, archeologists are woefully underprepared to assist individuals and groups in rights struggles,” and that while “applying a framework of universal human rights to resolve heritage conflicts” may be part of the solution we are looking for, “we are even further away from proposing ways in which a human rights approach might be implemented in... practice” (Meskell 2010, 839, 844, 855).

Both Singh (2010) and Kramer (2004) provide proficient alternatives in the very real situations where repatriation is either not possible or poses extreme difficulties. Despite repatriation becoming the basis for a complex array of differing opinions and arguments, the important part is the reason for why repatriation is imperative, more so than even the act of repatriation itself. Finding other methods of following through with the same intentions and placing Indigenous needs and wants at the center of this objective may even allow for a space where common ground can be nurtured to invest in workable solutions for the future. Putting in an effort to right the wrongs of the past as a collective, although this may prove to be a demanding uphill battle, is absolutely necessary in order to continue moving forward as a global society looking to shine light on a collective history.

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