

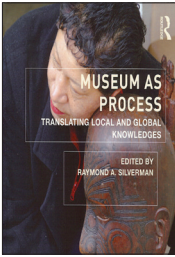
## REVIEWS

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### General

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**Raymond Silverman, ed., *Museum as Process: Translating Local and Global Knowledges***

Routledge, 2015. xvii + 303 pages. List of figures, notes, references, index. Paperback, US\$49.95, ISBN: 978-0-415-66157-7. Hardback, US\$150.00, ISBN: 978-0-415-66156-0. (E-book, ISBN: 978-1-315-76693-5.)

GLOBALLY, the museum as a cultural institution is in a period of radical change. From at least the late 1980s onward, curators, scholars, source communities, and viewing publics have been engaged in rethinking the nature of museum/community relationships. Attending to the imbalances of power (gendered, racial, ethnic, settler-colonial/indigenous, and so forth), a wide range of museum practitioners have begun to seek new modes of “collaboration involving museums defined broadly as collecting institutions (including archives), the communities that are represented in and by these institutions, and the individuals who mediate these encounters” (1). *Museum as Process* comprises an ethnographically rich, thoroughly reflexive series of accounts of these deeply collaborative ventures which, now in their third decade, have moved “beyond museums’ most public face, their exhibitions, to reach into other museum components and roles” including the structuring of databases and classification systems, the remodeling of storage spaces to allow for religious and ceremonial treatment of the material objects, and the rethinking of the nature and processes of knowledge production and claims to authenticity (281).

As editor Raymond Silverman notes in the Introduction, the volume grew out of a yearlong lecture series “Translating Knowledge: Global Perspectives on Museum and Community” that Silverman organized at the University of Michigan in 2009–2010. One of the major points of inspiration for the lecture series was the work of Ivan Karp, long a leading voice in scholarly and praxis-based discourse on the changing nature of museums, the politics of representation, and the relationships between museums and communities (whether source communities, viewing publics, or a combination of both). True to its multidisciplinary origins, *Museum as Process* works at the intersection of museum studies, applied anthropology, and Indigenous studies, while bearing the strong imprint of postcolonial and subaltern theory tuned to the ends of a pragmatic, ethical engagement.

Silverman identifies three key ways in which the volume as a whole intervenes into this cluster of ongoing debates. First, he provides an overall framework for understanding the process of collaboration as one of “transcultural translation,” a complex negotiation of meaning as “objects of knowledge” move across and are shared between different cultures and settings (3). Further, in a frank admission of the open-endedness of the work, Silverman advocates for a thick description of the dynamics of museum-community collaboration, arguing that “messiness” is a positive sign, and that “there is much to be learned from failure” (2), the experience of which ideally provides guidelines and important clues toward further, more enhanced and equitable partnerships. Finally, in his framing essay, Silverman offers a defense of “slow museology” (3). The fundamental insight of the volume is that museums must come to terms with “multiple ‘ways of knowing’ that often meet and coalesce in the objects upon which various meanings have been inscribed. This applies to both material culture as well as intangible tradition, basically anything that can be objectified” (3). In what follows, I will center my comments on those chapters likely to be of most interest to the readers of this journal—that is, the chapters which deal with Asian and Pacific Islander cultures and communities—while also giving a sense of the volume as a whole.

The first seven chapters provide deeply textured accounts concerning repatriation: the process of returning, in some form or fashion, a living object to its source community. One particularly interesting feature of this section is the way in which several of the chapters grapple with questions of material versus digital repatriation. Several of the authors describe the co-creation of databases and Gwyneira Isaac’s chapter caps off this opening section by problematizing economies of knowledge and heritage through a close consideration of museological circulations of Zuni material culture. A second, smaller grouping of three chapters describes the creation of community-based cultural centers, while a final section, also of three chapters, concerns exhibition projects. The closing chapter, by Ivan Karp and Cory Kratz, offers a critical summation, forwarding the idea of the “interrogative museum” as a processual space and an “interrogative attitude” as “one that will challenge—not overthrow, but challenge—the claims to authority that museums make” (294).

A core concept, developed across the volume as a whole, concerns the practice of decolonizing the museum. Aaron Glass’s chapter (“Indigenous Ontologies, Digital Futures”), focuses on collections of Northwest Coastal Indigenous Peoples’ cultural objects housed in Berlin and gives a fascinating account of how the construction of databases poses a “challenge to re-imagine... the terms of knowledge management so that multiple ways of knowing and being are encoded into the architecture of management systems themselves” (21). Glass provides extensive commentary on how his team grappled with encoding different cultural ontologies, taxonomies, and epistemologies into the digital database and, most crucially, fleshes out some of the ethical contours of “e-patriation” which he defines as “the transfer of tangible or intangible cultural patrimony (or heritage material) to its source community in the form of electronic or digital media” (23). As the authors of the next chapter (Bohaker, Ojii Cobriere, and Phillips, writing on Anishinaabe cultural representations in Ontario museums) note, ideally such collaboration and co-creation transforms the database “from a passive repository of standardized information to a digital space in which new knowledge is generated, lost knowledge recovered, and both added back into a shared knowledge pool that can change and enrich understandings” of cultural heritage and history (61).

The next three chapters focus on similar attempts to decolonize knowledge, now moving the geographical focus to Asia. Jennifer Shannon describes a collaborative project between the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History and the National Taiwan Museum. A richly suggestive dialogue, the collaboration involved the sharing of knowledge, protocols developed through intentionally conducted trial-and-error, and techniques learned through working with Indigenous communities: the Navajo Nation, on the one hand, and the Paiwan, on the other. Howard Murphy's chapter on "Open Access versus the Culture of Protocols" concerns the interfaces of Aboriginal peoples and the Australian museum, offering an investigation of the ways in which "protocols of diplomacy and protocols of the digital age come together in the discourse of access and rights in images" (97). Joshua A. Bell, on the other hand, takes the digital conversation and turns it toward a consideration of fieldwork, knowledge management, and the mapping of cultural objects in the Purari Delta of Papua New Guinea. Bell's fascinating chapter explores the failures and pitfalls of visibility (photographs, GPS, sketches) as it comes into contact and conflict with embodied, memorial, and oral knowledge claims.

The penultimate chapter, Paul Tapsell's "*Ko Tawa: Where Are the Glass Cabinets?*" was, for me, the most exciting study in the volume. A detailed account of "the challenges facing museums seeking to translate indigenous knowledge into an exhibitionary context" (262), the chapter lays out the ways in which the creation of a Maori Values Team "set in motion... distinct procedures of curatorial management" such that material objects "became 'human' again" (265). Tapsell recounts the lengthy, collaborative process of knowledge co-creation, focused on Captain Gilbert Mair's collection of Maori *taonga* (defined as "any item, tangible or intangible, passed down from kin-ancestors/tribal knowledge base," 266). As a process, this exhibit revealed long-forgotten, crucially important messages and meanings embodied in the material objects. "By gifting associated guardian ancestors or *taonaga* to Mair as a colonial agent," Tapsell argues, "Maori tribal leaders were ceremonially petitioning the government (Crown) to recognize and honor its 1840 Treaty of Waitangi promise to protect the tribes' leadership (*tino rangatiratanga*, absolute chieftainship) over their lands (*whenua*, placenta of Earth Mother), villages (*kainga*, *marae*-based communities) and resources (*toanga*)" (266).

There is some unevenness between the chapters, and the volume as a whole would have benefited from a more explicit framing of the sub-grouping of chapters. Eleven of the sixteen chapters (the first nine and the last two), for instance, focus on co-creation of knowledge with Indigenous communities. The remaining five chapters, however, while intriguing and exciting in their own ways, maintain a different focus. A more sharply-maintained interest on Indigeneity throughout, or a more robust editorial framing, would have articulated the ways in which Chapters 10-14 continue to develop the ideas and arguments developed in the first nine chapters and concluded in the final two. This would not have been too much of a stretch. As Ana Maria Theresa P. Labrador notes in her chapter on museums in southern Luzon, many of the social and cultural functions typically accorded to museums—communicating and exhibiting tangible and intangible heritage, providing opportunities for education and study, conserving material objects, and transmitting contextual and cultural information adhering to those objects—are performed by groups of people, "particularly among indigenous people" who may "share the responsibility of caring for sacred objects" and so forth (247).

Taken as a whole, the volume does an excellent job of accounting for the imperative to, the difficulties involved in, and the promise of “relocating authority” (12) such that the museum becomes a nexus of collaboration in which various knowledge systems, epistemologies, and value systems coexist and a variety of stakeholders each have access to, and differing valences of authority to speak about, living objects of material culture. Decolonizing the museum and creating a more symmetrical relationship between various stakeholders (most especially source communities from whom objects may have initially been taken or from whom objects may have been acquired inequitably) means asking a host of crucial questions. Museum professionals, applied anthropologists, Indigenous community organizers, and scholars in a range of fields (especially cultural anthropology, museum studies, Indigenous studies, and ethnography) will find this volume, the questions it asks, and the tentative answers it poses, of great interest. Its frank assessment and rich account of the promises, and rigorous demands, of collaborative knowledge creation are a gift to each of these fields.

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