

Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation by Hannah Turner

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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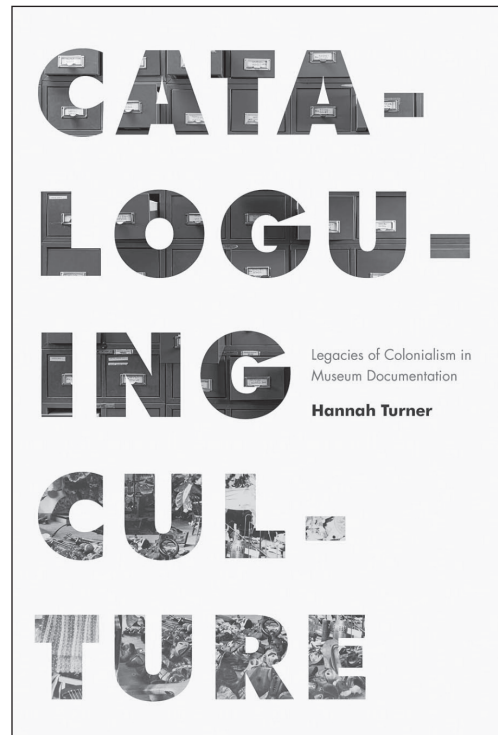
Cataloguing Culture
Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation

by Hannah Turner

Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press, 2020. 243 pages. 34.95 softcover ISBN 978077463933
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In this new contribution to the field of museum studies, Dr. Hannah Turner approaches the fields of museology, archeology, and ethnography through what is arguably at the very foundation of museums—the methods and philosophies of collecting and categorizing material culture. As Turner outlines in the introduction, they seek to encourage readers to “think critically about how documentation embeds certain narratives and occludes others” (7). Turner approaches this through a review of the historical collecting practices as well as archaeological and ethnographic works of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, arguing that the collections records themselves are an artefact worthy of study (186).

Turner’s scholarship reveals epistemological changes in the fields of archeology and ethnography that resulted in various hierarchies of information structures of classification which moved beyond the boundaries of the museum walls and into the field work of collectors both amateur and professional. Through the development of circulars meant to guide not only what was collected but also what information was deemed relevant to maintain about the collections the Smithsonian impacted what was seen to have value and importance. The text also illuminates one of the ongoing challenges of the sector as it demon-



strates that even for the largest of institutions, data entry often lags behind the acquisition of material for the collection resulting in disassociation of data from collections, and sometimes outright misplacement or loss of objects (39). While Turner does not address this matter directly in the text it is an underlying concern highlighted throughout the history of the Smithsonian’s collecting practices.

Of less importance to the text but

perhaps equally interesting is Turner's observations about who was tasked with the data entry in museums, as they point out this task primarily fell to women, whose work while significant to the functioning of the institution has often gone unrecognized, over shadowed by their male curatorial colleagues (106).

One of the most important findings Turner demonstrates is the role that collections management and data sets play in the dispossession of Indigenous materials from their communities of origin. Changes in disciplinary practices, as well as the methodology, processes, and technologies of cataloguing point to many of the ongoing challenges in the museological discipline as professionals attempt to address the colonial structures the discipline has been implicit in enforcing. Improper taxonomy, exonyms, location data, and even naming of objects, which have historically discounted Indigenous ways of understanding material culture continue to present barriers for community access, and thus perpetuate a power dynamic which maintain authority within the institutions rather than communities (98).

Turner approaches the subject of colonialism and databases in museums from the point of a microhistory focused primarily on the Smithsonian. One of the challenges of this approach is that it lacks comparative analysis of the museum field at large in this time period. While arguably one of the most well-known American museums the Smithsonian was part of a much larger network of institutions which traded and competed for artifacts, each with differing approaches to collections management. Another significant gap in the text is the connection between the collections documentation process and the public facing tasks of the mu-

seum. The prioritizing of certain data sets over others undoubtedly has an impact on exhibitions development, tours, and public lectures. Thus, much of the support of colonial knowledge structures and narratives are enforced within this realm of museum work. The overall argument of the text would have been strengthened by an inclusion of a discussion of the ways in which collections practice influence other areas of the museum.

Turner's work highlights important historical and contemporary considerations about a specific area of museological practice which has often been neglected in the field of museum studies and material culture. While practices of field work and exhibition have received much attention the data management and collections management function of museums, perhaps seen as less exciting, play an important role in the ways in which colonial systems of power and knowledge are re-enforced. The legacy of this work, informed primarily by disciplinary developments in archaeology and ethnology, each with their own focus and priorities can be seen even as technological changes impacted the ways in which cataloguing work was undertaken. As Turner points out the migration from paper records to digital presented an opportunity for recontextualizing and reconnecting collections and communities but even this was mired by imposed terminology and structures that ignored or discounted Indigenous world view and knowledges about their own cultural heritage and history (126).

Many of the challenges of data management and imbedded value systems expressed within the practice of documentation which Turner highlights can be seen in museological practices well be-

yond the Smithsonian. In Ontario, museum practitioners are faced with a history of collecting framed by colonial beliefs about what knowledge was valuable. Additionally, cross-border movement of material cultures from Indigenous communities presents ongoing challenges in terms of documenting provenance and engaging in repatriation. Turner's reflections on the migration from paper to digital and the opportunities that could be—but are often not—taken to include or recontextualize material from Indigenous communities present an ongoing challenge both for the institutions and Indigenous communities. These issues are further compounded by a lack of

available funding.¹

Cataloguing Culture is an important addition to our understanding of the history of museological practice and the ways in which colonial power can become entwined and enforced through collecting and collections management. Turner's examination of this history is clear, informative, and engaging providing an interesting text both for those working in museums and those studying their history.

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¹ For a recent and broad review of barriers to collections access for Indigenous communities including provenance see The Canadian Museums Association, *Moved to Action: Activating UN-DRIP in Canadian Museums*, 2022. https://museums.ca/uploaded/web/TRC_2022/Report-CMA-MovedToAction.pdf