

Repatriation as a field of power: a critical commentary on *The Empty Showcase Syndrome*, by Jos van Beurden

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IN A GLOBAL POLITICAL CLIMATE WHERE RESPECT FOR INTERNATIONAL law weakens and imperialist movements gain increasing power, museums emerge as institutions that should strive to play a crucial role in critically reviewing the histories that drove their development and the production of their heritage. The repatriation or restitution of archaeological, ethnographic, and artistic pieces to countries that suffered the ravages of colonialism constitutes one of the fundamental actions in this critical exercise, aimed at strengthening museum decolonization policies worldwide.

The book *The Empty Showcase Syndrome: Tough Questions about Cultural Heritage from Colonial Regions*, by Jos van Beurden, explores the rise of repatriations in Europe through the description and documentation of cases from 2020 onwards. In this continent, countries such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands have promoted the creation of legal frameworks and protocols for the return of objects acquired during the colonial period.

Van Beurden's book (2024) provides valuable ethnographic documentation of contemporary repatriation processes, especially in the Dutch context. However, despite this contribution, the book lacks a critical analysis that would account for the complexities the phenomenon reveals. Although the description of experiences, such as those of the Kingdom of Kandy and the Benin collections, reveals the negotiations between different actors and the tensions that emerge during these processes, there is a need for an approach that confronts the heterogeneity of conceptions and experiences of heritage and how these are negotiated and strained in a field of asymmetric power distribution.

REPATRIATION PROCESSES AS FIELDS OF POWER

The institutional dynamics, ethical research protocols, and legitimation of expert knowledge that comprise repatriations are not mere technical-administrative processes but rather embody fields where various actors (museums, governments, communities, and researchers) struggle to define what constitutes legitimate heritage and who has the legitimacy to safeguard such heritage.

Understanding repatriation processes as a field of power (Bourdieu 1991) is fundamental to problematizing the institutional practices and discursive and performative regimes that legitimize them. Van Beurden's book helps glimpse the ways in which repatriation discourses and practices establish a separation between those actors legitimized by European institutions to research and manage heritage and those who are not. However, the text resists delving into and interpreting these asymmetries, privileging the descriptive narration of the phenomenon.

Laurajane Smith (2006), in her book *Uses of Heritage*, accounts for how in patrimonialization processes dominant narratives, often from a Western perspective, continue to gain legitimacy, while other visions, such as those

of claimant communities, are systematically marginalized. The author interprets these asymmetries as the deployment of an “authorized heritage discourse” (AHD). In the context of repatriation, this type of discourse manifests itself in the persistence of values and experiences that privilege Western technical-scientific perspectives over alternative ways of understanding and relating to heritage. Van Beurden provides an important insight regarding provenance research, which generally does not equally include representatives and researchers from claimant countries. Why does this occur? While the author does not answer this question, he provides some clues about the problem when describing the case of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and the studies conducted to determine the provenance of objects from the Kingdom of Kandy (Sri Lanka) in its collection. In this study, the experiences and expertise of Sri Lankan researchers were clearly relegated compared to those of Dutch museum experts.

The asymmetries detected in the field of provenance research manifest violently in the exhibitions described by van Beurden, such as “Mayans: rulers of the rainforest” and “Ancient Egypt: digging for dreams”. These events reproduced colonial stereotypes about archaeological cultures like the Mayan and Egyptian. Similarly, human remains were exhibited, opening a problematic nexus between 19th century scientific practices and contemporary debates on restitution.

The exhibition of human remains in contemporary exhibitions raises fundamental questions about dignity, especially when communities of origin maintain ontological conceptions where ancestors are not objects of study but entities with continuous spiritual agency. This epistemological conflict questions the ethical legitimacy of the museification of the human body, as it evidences the unresolved tensions between Western scientific rationality and non-hegemonic knowledge systems.

The descriptions the author makes of exhibitions such as “Aztecs: The Man behind the Myth”, or the exhibition of Benin objects, although rich in details, do not analyze how these exhibitions naturalize who should speak and how about uncomfortable heritage. Nevertheless, in museological *praxis*, discourses materialize in concrete exhibition practices. Hooper-Greenhill (1992) has shown how the epistemology of museum space and how exhibition practices constitute regimes of visibility that determine not only what is shown but how knowledge about what is exhibited is constructed. In *The Birth of the Museum*, Bennett (1995) observes that exhibitions are not neutral spaces of representation but technologies of social ordering that produce and reproduce specific power relations. This aspect, although present in van Beurden’s descriptions of various exhibitions, lacks a systematic analysis that would allow understanding how exhibition practices articulate and legitimize certain forms of knowledge over others.

DIVERSE ACTORS, DIVERSE CONCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF HERITAGE

Van Beurden's book refers to the "empty showcase syndrome" as a metaphor for European museums' fears about the future of repatriations in Europe. While this metaphor is interesting and touches on an important dimension of the repatriation problem, it does not sufficiently explore the perspectives of claimant countries regarding their own heritage management. Beyond the idea of possessing a unique object, repatriations touch on the problem of how heritage can mobilize identities, histories, and memories, as well as reveal geopolitics.

The author refers to the diversity of actors linked to disputed heritage in claimant countries, but we know little about them, their conceptions, discourses, and performances related to the heritage at stake. Authors such as Tythacott and Arvanitis (2014), Turnbull and Pickering (2010), and Rassool and Gibbon (2023) have highlighted the importance of addressing the problem of repatriations from the perspective of the different actors involved. These authors question traditional paradigms of cultural property and heritage, with the aim of incorporating the perspectives of communities of origin and examining the political, practical, and symbolic implications of repatriation.

Van Beurden's work mentions disputes about to whom restituted objects should be returned (nations, indigenous communities, local museums), but without delving into how the societies of origin themselves define the function and value of these goods today. While he correctly connects colonial looting with the structural violence of colonialism, his approach remains in the legal and moral dimension of restitution, leaving aside the role of heritage in the formation of contemporary collective memories.

An example of how heritage is linked to cultural memories and performances is the history of the moai Hoa Hakananai'a. This sculpture was stolen from Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in 1868 during the passage of the frigate *Topaze* commanded by Richard Ashmore Powell. The following year, in 1869, Queen Victoria donated the statue to the British Museum. Despite the passage of time and the increase in repatriation actions in Europe, Hoa Hakananai'a continues to be exhibited by the British Museum. Although this institution has expressed willingness to work with the Rapa Nui people, it has refused to yield to the repatriation requests of the Rapa Nui and the Chilean Government.¹

Now, cases like that of Hoa Hakananai'a not only call into question the legitimacy of those who exhibit and safeguard these uncomfortable heritages.

1 In July 2018, the British Museum received a written request from a Rapa Nui delegation for the return of the Moai Hoa Hakananai'a and the Moai Hava. This request was ratified by the Ministry of National Assets of the Chilean government.



Figure 1 – Hoa Hakananai'a (Rapa Nui), currently at the British Museum. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/123895834@N08/52649280451/>

They also show us the complexity of the actors involved in these processes and the different ways of conceiving and experiencing these heritages. In the Rapa Nui case, the importance of Hoa Hakananai'a is not reduced to the pain caused by the pillaging of the sculpture from its place of origin, but is mainly related to the key role of this sculpture in the myths and rituals of Hotu Matua the birdman, events intimately associated with Rapa Nui memory and identity. Moreover, in the negotiations and discourses of the Rapa Nui around the archaeological heritage of the island, they have emphasized the idea of living heritage, in order to shift the focus on heritage as something purely material.

Cases like that of Hoa Hakananai'a show that repatriations of colonial collections are far from being easy and consensual processes. Various studies, some of them cited by the author (Smith 2006; Savoy 2022), have shown that the analysis of these phenomena requires an approach that addresses the negotiations and regimes of value and meaning that circulate around disputed heritage. This step is fundamental to account for the nuances and complexities of the relationship between communities and the leading actors of the claims, in which certain discourses, practices, and forms of heritage knowledge acquire legitimacy over others.

CONCLUSIONS

The critical analysis of *The Empty Showcase Syndrome* reveals the complexities of the field of repatriation and the limitations of current approaches to its study. Although the book provides valuable documentation on contemporary repatriation processes, its methodological approach and analytical framework are insufficient to understand the power dynamics that structure this field.

By privileging description over critical interpretation, van Beurden misses the opportunity to problematize how repatriations constitute scenarios where historically asymmetric geopolitical relations are reconfigured. The “empty showcase syndrome” – the central metaphor of his work – evidences a primarily European concern: the institutional fear of losing collections that reveal geopolitics. This perspective, although documentarily valuable, inadvertently reproduces the same bias it aims to question.

Contemporary repatriation policies should not be understood as simple gestures of goodwill or symbolic reparation, but as opportunities to radically reconfigure the epistemologies that sustain museum institutions. This implies not only the physical return of objects but a profound revision of the conceptual, methodological, and ethical frameworks that determine what constitutes heritage and how it should be managed. Van Beurden exhaustively documents the “what” and “how” of repatriations but avoids interrogating the “why” and “for what purpose” from non-Western perspectives.

A truly decolonizing approach would require incorporating participatory methodologies that grant epistemic protagonism to communities of origin. This means recognizing that the objects in dispute are not mere material testimonies of the colonial past, but polysemic entities whose value and meaning are constructed through specific social, ritual, and political practices. The case of Hoa Hakananai'a demonstrates that for the Rapa Nui people, the moai is not simply an archaeological artifact, but an actant in complex networks of cultural and identity signification. Faced with van Beurden's descriptive documentation, it becomes necessary to develop analytical frameworks that allow understanding repatriations as processes of ontological negotiation. Provenance investigations are not neutral exercises in historical documentation, but practices that privilege certain regimes of truth and authority. When the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam marginalizes the expertise of Sri Lankan researchers, it not only reproduces academic asymmetries but consolidates knowledge hierarchies that continue to position Europe as the centre of epistemic legitimation.

As Savoy demonstrates with respect to the German case (2022), institutional resistances to repatriations articulate complex networks of economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical interests that van Beurden outlines but does not delve into. European museums are not simply disinterested custodians of global heritage, but political actors whose institutional practices reproduce and reinforce certain world orderings and regimes of visibility.

The effective decolonization of museums requires going beyond the technical management of heritage returns. It demands a reconfiguration of the relationships between cultural institutions, communities of origin, and diverse audiences. It implies recognizing that heritage is not simply objects to be preserved, but nodes in complex networks of cultural significance that articulate collective memories, identities, and political projects. While van Beurden provides valuable elements to document this ongoing process, his descriptive approach is insufficient to understand the profound epistemological, ethical, and political implications it entails.

To account for the multiple voices, interests, and value regimes that converge in these processes, it is necessary that in the future studies on repatriations develop methodological approaches that integrate multidisciplinary and multi-situated perspectives. Only then can we overcome Eurocentric approaches that, even when seeking to adopt a critical stance, continue to privilege certain ways of knowing, valuing, and relating to cultural heritage. The true overcoming of the "empty showcase syndrome" does not lie in finding new objects to fill museum spaces, but in radically reimagining what museums are and what they serve for in a world that today, more than ever, needs to rethink its history.

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