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**Dismantling the Postcolonial Museum. Review of  
Manuel Burón, El patrimonio recobrado. Museos  
indígenas en México y Nueva Zelanda, Madrid, Marcial  
Pons, 2019**

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► **To cite this version:**

José Beltrán. Dismantling the Postcolonial Museum. Review of Manuel Burón, El patrimonio recobrado. Museos indígenas en México y Nueva Zelanda, Madrid, Marcial Pons, 2019. Passés Futurs, 2022. hal-04250625

**HAL Id: hal-04250625**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04250625>**

Submitted on 24 Nov 2023

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Distmantling the Postcolonial Museum. Review of Manuel Burón, *El patrimonio recobrado. Museos indígenas en México y Nueva Zelanda* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2019).

### Talking for Things

Restitution is in the air. Should European museums return cultural heritage to the descendants of the communities from whom it was illegally or immorally taken? In that case, what should be the extent and modalities of return? Far from new, such questions have been raging with revived fervor in recent years, especially in countries with an uncomfortable colonizing past. In France, the issue has been popping up intermittently over the past decades – in 2002, for example, when the skeleton and body cast of Saartjie Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus,” was given back to South Africa and again in 2012 with the return of twenty mummified tattooed Maori heads, or *Toi moko*, to New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> Yet debates over restitution have recently gained momentum and shifted substantially in nature, especially after Emmanuel Macron’s 2017 speech in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, during his first official visit to the African continent, when the president unexpectedly announced the return of African objects in French national collections to their communities of origin. The immediate and so far only tangible outcome of that speech was a report commissioned to scholars Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy: its release in 2018 and favorable views on restitution made a splash in the media and among museum professionals. Large European museums were put on the defensive. At the British Museum, whose piles of restitution demands stand among the highest, its director emphasized the institution’s uniqueness as a “universal museum,” a collection open to all “the citizens of the world” and whose value “resides in its breadth, its complexity, and its unity.” The president of the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac at the time was far more straightforward, charging against the Sarr/Savoy report as “a cry of hate against the very notion of the museum” for advocating for transfers of property rather than long-term loans.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For scholarly analysis of both events, see Michel Van-Praët, “Saartjie Baartman, une restitution témoin d’un contexte muséal en évolution,” in *La Venus Hottentote entre Barnum et Muséum*, ed. Claude Blanckaert (Paris: Publications scientifiques du Muséum national d’histoire naturelle, 2013); Mélanie Roustan, “De l’adieu aux choses au retour des ancêtres. La remise par la France des têtes Māori à la Nouvelle-Zélande,” *Socio-anthropologie* 30 (2014), 183-198.

<sup>2</sup> Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, “Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle,” November 2018. Online at: <http://restitutionreport2018.com>. A revised version is available as *Restituer le patrimoine africain* (Paris: Philippe Rey/Seuil, 2018). See also Farah Nayeri, “France Vowed to Return Looted Treasures. But Few Are Heading Back,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/arts/design/restitution-france-africa.html>; and “L’ex-patron du Quai Branly dénonce un rapport prônant des restitutions massives d’œuvres à l’Afrique,” *Le Monde-AFP*, February 20, 2020: [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/02/20/l-ex-patron-du-quai-branly-denonce-un-rapport-pronant-des-restitutions-massives-d-uvres-a-l-afrique\\_6030194\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/02/20/l-ex-patron-du-quai-branly-denonce-un-rapport-pronant-des-restitutions-massives-d-uvres-a-l-afrique_6030194_3212.html).



Figure 1. Royal statues of the Kingdom of Dahomey (19th century), displayed at the Musée Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris, and one of the most visible pieces in the recent debates about the restitution of African art in French museums. (CC Licence)

To be sure, the debate among museum scholars and professionals on the restitution of cultural heritage is far more nuanced than the media would let us think, but it still belies two different lines of discussion. One tackles cultural heritage as property – and an often-ill acquired one for that matter, whose restitution would rest on legal or, at the very least, moral grounds. Restitution is here understood as a powerful political, economic, and symbolic instrument, one still largely hogged by old colonial powers but that could prove crucial for communities deprived of such resources. Sarr and Savoy talk about “a new relational ethics,” more equitable grounds for interaction between former colonizers and colonized nations. Only a transfer of property would allow the latter to re-appropriate their cultural heritage on their own terms.<sup>3</sup>

The other line of discussion resurrects, in the field of “museum studies,” arguments that came into prominence in the wake of late-twentieth-century postcolonial approaches to the social sciences. It revolves around the capacity of (Western) museums to hold a universal discourse whose validity would go beyond cultural difference. Can a culture speak for or about other cultures without falling irremediably into a condescending ventriloquism? Is the aspiration to universality (in museums, but also in the social sciences, both European products to a large extent) still tenable when in practice it translates into a Western exceptionalism?<sup>4</sup> But does the contrary not involve a solipsistic view of cultural heritage, wherein only a certain culture could speak for and from their own cultural heritage? These are old interrogations, but they have been recently given a new spin for several reasons. One

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<sup>3</sup> Sarr and Savoy, “Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain,” XX: “Guidé par le dialogue, la polyphonie et l’échange, le geste de la restitution ne saurait en outre être considéré comme un acte dangereux d’assignation identitaire ou de cloisonnement territorial des biens culturels. Il invite tout au contraire à *ouvrir* la signification des objets, et à offrir à ‘l’universel’ auquel ils sont si souvent associées en Europe la possibilité d’être éprouvé ailleurs.”

<sup>4</sup> All eighteen signatories of the “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums” in 2002 were institutions in Europe and the United States, for example.

is the generalized crisis of the traditional anthropology museum from the 1990s onwards, for example, as noted by Jesús Bustamante. But another is the persistent return of racial questions to the public forefront (the killing of George Floyd in 2020 and the renewal of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States is but the latest instance): a public preoccupation, as Silvia Sebastiani has lately reminded us in a 2019 special issue in this very journal, wherein anthropology museums (still a fundamental place for public and institutionalized discourses about humanity) remain central (“[Questions aux musées d’anthropologie](#)”).<sup>5</sup>

### The Awakening of the “Native” Mummy

Manuel Burón’s *El patrimonio recobrado. Museos indígenas en México y Nueva Zelanda* offers a remarkable and sophisticated contribution to these discussions.<sup>6</sup> Published in 2019 and the result of a doctoral dissertation in history, the book is innovative on several accounts. Debates on the issue are still to a regrettable degree European ones, marked by European preoccupations and addressed to European audiences. They therefore delve little into what constitutes Burón’s focus: what happens *after* returns of cultural heritage take place, especially when they bring to bear museological protocols that go against the grain of “classic” (that is, Western-defined) museography. How do formerly colonized communities put the material heritage they claim as their own to use, whether this was actually alienated or resisted attempts to do so? Can “non-Western” forms of handling and relating to patrimony be pitted against “classic” museology? And most importantly, does restitution mean reverting the instrumentalizing gesture of colonial appropriation so that the objects can “recover” their original lives and meanings, scraping off the significations imposed unto them by an alien culture?

Burón interrogates a specific sort of collecting institution that has benefited from processes of restitution: indigenous museums. A useful concept for lack of a better one – strictly speaking, the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, featuring the culture and history of the city, is just as indigenous as a museum can be – indigenous museums are collections in which a certain community curates on their own terms cultural patrimony of which they are the most direct inheritors.<sup>7</sup> Moreover – and here is the key of the definition – they result from and foster processes of empowerment and self-affirmation, often on the basis of an ethnical identity and usually in reaction to a past of colonial dependence. In other words, the indigenous museums at the center of Burón’s analysis are postcolonial in their origin and

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<sup>5</sup> Silvia Sebastiani, ed., “Les vitrines de l’humanité: Questions aux musées d’anthropologie,” special issue, *Passés futurs*, 6 (2019), online at: <https://politika.io/fr/numero-revue-pf/vitrines-lhumanite>. See also Jesús Bustamante, ed., “Museos de antropología en Europea y América Latina: crisis y renovación,” special issue, *Revista de Indias*, 72, no. 254 (2012), 11-238, online at: <http://revistadeindias.revistas.csic.es/index.php/revistadeindias/issue/view/93>.

<sup>6</sup> Manuel Burón, *El patrimonio recobrado: Museos indígenas en México y Nueva Zelanda* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> A good study that counters this view of the “indigenous” as a non-Western reality is Alix Cooper, *Inventing the Indigenous: Local Knowledge and Natural History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For an assessment of how the notion of “indigeness” has been appropriated in idiosyncratic ways in French museology, see Mélanie Roustan, “Les usages de l’autochtonie dans les musées français,” *Cultures & Musées* 28 (2016), 151–75.



decolonizing in their aim: they are markedly “non-Western” and actively seek to revert the impact of European imperialism on the societies of which they are part. Such a position is rooted in and has fueled over the years a series of assumptions, and it is these assumptions that this book seeks to critically assess.

In order to do so, the author brings together two improbable case studies, as distant in space as they are dissimilar in nature. The first brings us to the Southern Mexican state of Oaxaca and studies a selection of eighteen small, generally little-known, and often out-of-the-way community museums, virtually all of which are assembled in the Unión de Museos Comunitarios de Oaxaca (UMCO), founded in 1991. The second invites us to cross the Pacific Ocean westward to enter into a radically different sort of institution, the massive national Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, established soon after the UMCO, in 1992, and reuniting and entirely recasting the old Dominion Museum and the National Art Gallery into a purpose-built construction in the harbor of Wellington.



*Figure 2. Zapotec archeological piece displayed in the Museo Shan Dany in Santa Ana del Valle in Tlacolula, Oaxaca. (D.R. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico)*

The UMCO and Te Papa stem from disparate contexts and promote highly contrasting (re-)appropriations of indigenous culture, history, and heritage. They share in common, nevertheless, the key impetus behind the movement of indigenous museology that arose during the last quarter of the twentieth century: the quest for an active involvement of indigenous communities in defining the criteria through which their heritage is curated, handled, and exhibited. Or, to put it in distinctively postcolonial tone, they sought to transform the “native” from a collection object to a museum subject; from a mummified specimen in a showcase, so to speak, to an active actor not only in the musealization of indigenous heritage, but also in the redefinition of the very notion of the “museum.”



Figure 3. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa ("Container of Treasures") in Wellington. (CC Licence)

The two cases are enlightening examples of how indigenous communities have been gaining museological agency from the 1970s onwards. In Oaxaca, community museums are administered and curated by committees of elected neighbors along the lines of indigenous customary law (*usos y costumbres*), idiosyncratic forms of government that are singularly pervasive in the region. It is toward Te Papa, however, that we should turn to find one of the most visible cases worldwide of indigenous empowerment in the space of the museum. In sharp contrast to the secular tones of “classic”/Western museum methods, spirituality imbues Maori museography throughout. It translates into deliberately staged rituals that give shape and substance to museological *tikanga Maori*, a set of distinctively Maori protocols or “way of doing things.” *Karakia*, or prayers, are sung to mark special events, such as the reception of restituted objects or the reopening of the museum after the lockdown for the Covid-19 crisis in spring 2020; bowls of water in storage areas allow visitors to cleanse themselves from the *tapu*, or sacred force of objects; and green leaves are placed near exhibited artefacts as a sign of respect toward them. The touchstone of Maori museography is the understanding of heritage objects as *taonga*, “treasures” or culturally significant objects that are considered “alive” by virtue of their being depositories of ancestors’ spirits.



Figure 4. Te Hau-ki-Tūranga, a historic where whakairo or carved meeting house and the older of its kind, at Te Papa. (CC Licence)

What Burón crucially shows in his book, drawing from Conal McCarthy's pioneering work on Maori museography, is that indigenous museum methods constitute not, as it is often claimed, a return to an original state of things disrupted by colonial appropriation, but the product of a rather recent historical process. In other words, indigenous museography has been the object of active elaboration during and in close connection with processes of decolonization and indigenous identity construction that have been unfolding in earnest only since the last quarter of the twentieth century. Placing green leaves next to Maori objects, for example, is a recent innovation; the notion of *taonga* has evolved substantially over the past century; and the museographic tones at Te Papa, more generally, were set in a radically new direction by the successful and immensely influential itinerant exhibition "Te Maori," inaugurated in 1984 in New York and largely considered as a turning point in the *Maori Renaissance* because it was the first time that Maori heritage was curated by Maoris.<sup>8</sup>

If the historicity of indigenous museography has been obscured in indigenous museums such as the Te Papa and those gathered around the UMCO, it is because the historical component plays an ambivalent role in them. The past – more often than not a distant, ancestral one that predates the disruptive watershed of colonization – is featured prominently in both cases as an identity point of reference while being, by the same token, systematically ruled out as a key for understanding the inscription of indigenous heritage in changing and often interlocking contexts. Take the case of Oaxaca: seventeen out of the eighteen community museums studied by Burón exhibit pre-Hispanic materials whose discovery was often the catalyst for their foundations. The community museum Shan Dany ("under the hill") in Santa Ana del Valle in Tlacolula, for example, was founded in 1986 to house recently unearthed pre-Hispanic funerary remains. It is not an isolated case, for not only did Shan Dany actually prompt the foundation of the UMCO and become a model for other community museums in Oaxaca; it also came to embody, as Burón notes, the main museographic mechanism at work in Oaxacan communitarian museology, namely a "historical-cultural thread between a pre-Hispanic foundational past . . . and the immediate present of indigenous communities."<sup>9</sup> By presenting archeological materials alongside "native" folk handicrafts marketed as of late for tourists, while at the same time blocking out the Hispanic period more often than not, a link is tied between an "archeological" Amerindian and an "anthropological" one, an operation of identity construction that turns colonial times into an externally imposed intermission through which indigenous people and culture broke from the 1970s onwards to re-emerge as the true essence of Mexico. The same goes for Te Papa, where historical objects are presented along with contemporary ones (say, a nineteenth-century *hei-tiki* pendant together with a plastic version produced nowadays for tourists) as a way to highlight the endurance of Maori culture even after colonization.

The decolonization of indigenous heritage, then, often involves a sort of de-historization and cultural essentialization that does not account for interactions between indigenous and non-indigenous actors through time. As Burón convincingly argues

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<sup>8</sup> Conal McCarthy, "Before 'Te Maori': A Revolution Deconstructed," in *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed*, ed. Simon Knell, Suzanne MacLeod, and Sheila Watson (London: Routledge, 2007), 117–33.

<sup>9</sup> Burón, *El patrimonio recobrado*, 127–8. Translations from Spanish are mine.

throughout the book, the involvement of native communities in the management and construction of national heritage in Mexico and New Zealand largely predates the emergence of indigenous museums, even though relations were usually uneven. In Oaxaca, local notables such as school teachers and municipal leaders frequently acted as private collectors and intermediaries between federal institutions – the Institution nacional de arqueología e historia (INHA), for example – and their communities long before a national law on historical monuments and archeological sites in 1972 formally integrated civil associations (*juntas de vecinos* and *uniones de campesinos*, among others) in the care and management of heritage.

The history of how indigenous and non-indigenous actors interacted through time, whether in terms of collaboration, negotiation, or collision, is particularly absent from Te Papa, whose very architecture and museography translates a distinctively New Zealander approach to nation-building based on *biculturalism*: the coexistence of two cultural spheres, the *pakeha* (people of European descent) and the Maori, sealed in the famous Treaty of Waitangi of 1840. Biculturalism has evolved over time to bear a more capacious understanding of at least one of the parts, proposing a divide between *tangata whenua*, or “people of the land” (that is, Maoris), and *tangata tiriti*, or “people of the Treaty” (that is, all those who came after, including European colonists and their descendants but also peoples of Asian descent and Polynesians). In the museum as in the nation, Te Papa is organized into two hemispheres. One exhibits Maori heritage, is curated by Maori curators, or *kaitiaki*, according to *tikanga Maori*, and fastens a bond between Maori culture of the past and present to stress their culture’s endurance; the other, the *pakeha*, flies the flag of multiculturalism by stressing circulation, exchange, and negotiation.

Demonstrating that indigenous communities are far less monolithic and airtight than postcolonial approaches *and* indigenous museology would often let us think is one of the main goals of the book, one that Burón certainly meets for the case of Oaxacan community museums by tracing stories of resistance and conflict. Competition for territory and heritage between neighboring towns, as well as between the local communities and the centralizing forces of federal institutions, shaped in fundamental ways the region’s community museums, their origins and orientation, as tools of identity formation. That is the case of the Cerro de la Campana, one of the best preserved funerary sites in Mexico, the control of which was disputed between neighboring Hutizo and Suchilquitongo, then between the local communities and the INHA. Another example is Santa Ana del Valle, whose pioneering community museum was shaped by the town’s attempt to gain economic emancipation from Teotitlán del Valle; or that of Natividad, in Sierra Norte, whose collection stresses the working class identity of a community grown around a local mine, while nearby Capulálpam delves into an ethnic, environmentally-friendly identity that is presented as under the strain of capitalist advances, such as those embodied by its neighbor’s mining industry.

Stories such as these, although summarily described, permit Burón to draw a portrait of Mexican indigenous communities far richer and more polyphonic than the one that the dichotomy colonized-colonizer allows us to see. Yet this thread is not followed with the same vigor in the case of the Te Papa, where the narrative of Maori homogeneity, harmoniousness, and unobstructed progress towards cultural emancipation told in the museum’s exhibits goes largely unquestioned. The problem here is probably one regarding the scale of analysis: Burón maintains a generalizing analytical focus through most of the book, rarely and only



briefly descending into focused studies of particular situations. This is especially true for the chapter on New Zealand, where his sophisticated critical analysis is sometimes weakened by lack of attention to episodes of conflict or negotiation. One is left wondering about whether there were any revealing tensions in setting up Te Papa and shaping New Zealand's discourse on national heritage – tensions between the *pakeha* and Maori spheres, of course, but also between the different *iwi*, or Maori tribes, involved in setting up the museum, given that their political and social influence differs greatly from one to another.



Figure 5. Community museum Balaa Xtee Guech Gulal in Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca (CC Licence)

### Dismantling the Postcolonial Museum

That being said, Burón skillfully succeeds in his goal of navigating between the two reefs that have marked museum studies, at least until very recently. On the one hand, there is a postmodern, Foucauldian-inspired understanding of the museum as an irremediably Western mechanism of domination and disciplinarization, an instrument in the hands of European imperial powers for the symbolic and physical subordination of colonized cultures.<sup>10</sup> On the other, there is the very specific anthropological positioning on which the process of patrimonial decolonization have usually been grounded, that is “an ontological or essentialist view of heritage, understood as a material manifestation of, or essence emanating from, a cultural, ethnic, or national group.” The solution, for Burón, resides in acknowledging that cultural heritage is certainly “a political artefact, a powerful economic and symbolic resource for the present,” but not only in the hands of colonial powers: hence his felt need “to celebrate that different communities take part in its use, but also to unveil how much there is in this of political and cultural construction.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), and *Museums, Power, Knowledge: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Burón, *El patrimonio recobrado*, 33.



The use of cultural heritage as a symbolic, political, and economic tool is most evident at Te Papa and throughout the history of the *Maori Renaissance* from the 1980s onwards: Maori material and immaterial heritage played a non-negligible role in Maoris' capacity to increase, *as an ethnic group*, their international visibility and symbolic and political influence in New Zealand under the umbrella of biculturalism. Identity construction is also at the core of the community museums of the UMCO, but there it treaded on an entirely different path. Even though a good number of the Oaxacan museums studied by Burón showcase specific ethnic identities (Zapotec, Mixtec, Mixe, Chinantecan), the sort of identity construction at work in them answers to communitarian and territorial logics falling under the notion of *vecindad* (neighborhood), rather than ethnic logics. In sharp contrast to New Zealand's bicultural approach to nation-building, the specificity of Oaxaca lies in its exceptional political atomization: it is the Mexican state with by far the most municipalities, a fifth of the whole country (the next on the list, Puebla, counting not even half its number). Hence the importance of territoriality in Oaxacan community museums, as borne out by the case of the collections in the Mixtec region and their emphatic presentation of evidence of an ancestral adscription to the land such as *títulos primordiales*, documents attesting the territorial rights of indigenous communities composed during the colonial era.

Burón casts his contextualizing net widely, and that is the great strength of his book. Communitarian museology in Oaxaca was largely a reaction to *indigenismo*, a centralizing, from-the-top cultural policy that held sway in Mexico after the Revolution and that presented a narrative of the Mexican nation based on the pre-Hispanic past. Such a narrative was based on "the triumph of anthropology as the science of the regime and *indigenismo* as the ideology of the state." In New Zealand, the appropriation of Maori cultural heritage by Maoris was radically different, Burón stresses, for it was rooted on ethnic identity rather than a territorial one. Maori culture came to occupy the vacuum left in the national imaginary of New Zealand by a crisis of *pakeha* identity, whose culmination came with the entrance of the United Kingdom, the old and still commercially and symbolically influential metropolis, into the European Union in the 1970s.

Placing indigenous museums in the local contexts in which they came into being, as Burón does, complicates the vision of indigenous museology as a reaction to and the opposite of "classic"/Western museology. Burón asks: "where can we place, in this schema, the scientific discourse that emerged in parallel to the museum and that gave rise to both the classic museum and its own critic?"<sup>12</sup> Thinking about anthropology as an irremediably Western and imperial form of knowledge, and about indigenous museology as its opposite, makes it difficult to account for episodes of collaboration between indigenous communities and specialists (as in the case of Ñuu Kuiñi, a museum in Cuquila, where the work of anthropologists proved crucial for giving meanings and value to the objects for the community). But even when it does – by approaching museums, for example, as "contact zones," to use the concept coined by James Clifford – it runs the risk of essentializing identities in a cartography split by lines too neat to be accurate. The fundamental role that Mexican indigenous anthropologists played in launching the movement of indigenous museums in Oaxaca, or the figure of the *kaitiaki* in New Zealand, largely concocted during

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<sup>12</sup> Burón, *El patrimonio recobrado*,

the 1980s and '90s with ingredients borrowed from both “classic” curatorship and traditional Maori spirituality, are important cases in point.

What Burón offers is a refined contextualization of a phenomenon that has rarely been studied from a comparative point of view.<sup>13</sup> By doing so, he is able to develop a complex and rich historical understanding of how indigenous communities mediated and still mediate museum representations through their material heritage. He also provides important tools for thinking about current debates on restitution without the blinkers of presentism.

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<sup>13</sup> For a forthcoming exception, see Conal McCarthy, ed., *Indigenous Museology: Insides from Australia Aotearoa New Zealand* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).