

Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture

By Chip Colwell

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In *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, Chip Colwell explores the history and practice of cultural heritage and human remains repatriation to Native Americans from his standpoint as a curator at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science (DMNS). Using four case studies from his own experience, Colwell dives into the fraught history and relationships between Native Americans and museums in the United States that culminated in the passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990. His vignettes peel back the veneer of acrimony to reveal people with deeply personal stakes in the objects/entities they seek. In this way, Colwell's book is not about the politics or ethics of museums and repatriation, but is about meaning imbued into the objects/entities of contestation and why these hold such central importance, for diverse reasons, to so many people.

Each of his case studies explores an object/entity or suite of objects/entities from a different geographic region of the United States, including the Southwest (Zuni), Plains (Cheyenne), Northwest Coast (Tlingit) and Southeast (Miccosukee). In the book's opening section, Colwell traces the histories and legacies of the Zuni 'War Gods' and the subsequent repatriation battles waged by the Zuni pre- and post-NAGPRA. The second section lands like a gut-punch as Colwell relates the atrocious history of the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, in which the US cavalry was directed to destroy a camp of Cheyenne who were flying both the American flag and

the white flag of surrender as the soldiers approached. Colwell traces the private collections and museum collections formed of human remains and objects often taken by US soldiers from the still-warm bodies of Native men, women and children. The third section tackles the internationally regarded art of the Northwest Coast tribes, who are trying to understand how to reclaim and curate their own cultural heritage while reinstating their regular ceremonial usages of those objects. The final section explores the problems of determining ownership of objects/entities and whether human remains in particular should be repatriated or reburied, regardless of what affiliation the individual remains truly embody.

These case studies are personal to Colwell, and he takes his commitments to the people he is working with seriously. In demonstrating this, Colwell implicitly reveals a cultural relativity that puts indigenous ontologies on an equal plane with secular, Western ontology. Explicitly, there is often a struggle between what he thinks and what he is told by his Indigenous collaborators. However, his engagement with the deeply personal meanings of these objects/entities seems to guide his work and is central to the thesis of this book. Whether it is a descendant of families massacred at Sand Creek whose pain is still visceral or the non-Native representative of the Miccosukee who is trying to advocate the spirituality of his adopted community, this book investigates the stakes people have in these contentious objects/entities and reveals their importance to individuals and communities.

Colwell's take on the heavy issues of repatriation and ethics is, perhaps ironically, refreshing and invigorating amidst a wide body of critical and polarized literature. Too often, the repatriation literature serves as a mode of negative critique—emphasizing what institutions, individuals or communities are doing or getting wrong. Colwell certainly provides negative critique where it is warranted; however, he primarily pursues the reasons why these objects/entities have come to be so important to indigenous communities and museum staff alike. Moreover, he explores multiple social contexts and different types of objects/entities that underscore the vast multiplicity of tribes, beliefs, values and interests in cultural heritage. Embracing and demonstrating that complexity is crucial to constructing better relationships between researchers, museums and Native Americans.

This perhaps reveals the niche for this book: museum professionals. Museums throughout the world have faced new and unprecedented questions in the past couple of decades regarding their positions and futures in a postcolonial world. With the passing of NAGPRA in the US and a new emphasis on repatriation, especially of human remains, throughout the world, museums representing Indigenous Peoples have had to look at their policies and practices again in order to accommodate the vast and various stakeholders of their collections. In many cases, curators are asked to address repatriation claims without any sort of formal guidance. Colwell's book stands out as a beacon of light, a guide to best practices in these complex and difficult cases. Although Colwell likely enjoys a level of support from his institution, DMNS, that few curators will ever experience, museum directors, curators and staff should use this book to understand what stakes those being represented in their museums have in their own objects/entities.

Colwell's book also stands alone in its accessibility to the public. While other books have attempted to reach outside their respective authors' small academic circles, none have been so earnestly addressed to members of the general public with an interest in museums or Native Americans. Colwell's writing style is beautiful and simple, situating himself and his voice from the very first pages. He reflects the vibrant personalities of his stories with a deftness not often found in academia. The personalization of each case study provides strong incentive for the reader to follow the stories to their conclusion, despite Colwell weaving in details of NAGPRA, museum bureaucracy or emotionally excruciating historical details that might otherwise not sustain a reader's desire to keep the book open.

In this attempt for public accessibility, however, it seems that Colwell has perhaps struck a frustrating middle ground, in which the content and depth of analysis may be too specific for wider publics yet unsatisfying for academics. By not investigating abstractions like museum ethics, theory or politics, the general reader will find they need little or no background in the discipline to understand this book. However, they must have a stout heart and strong interest in museums and/or contemporary Native Americans if they are to make it through the entirety of the book. Meanwhile, the academic with a distinct interest in the subject might find the lack of the above-mentioned abstractions a significant shortcoming.

It has long been a staple in academia to determine how to make research more accessible to the general public. This is perhaps done best in fields like history, which often have strong narratives to get readers invested. Anthropology has struggled to provide books of broad appeal, especially as it has moved away from the 'primitive' exoticism that made Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* so popular. This is what is so revolutionary about Colwell's approach: it denies the exoticism of the 'Other' but seeks a general audience. He refutes the romanticized history of the 'Indian Wars' that may be the very interest a non-academic has in picking up the book. For this reason, Colwell's book is particularly prescient, yet at the same time challenged by the (lack of) general interest in these museum issues.

In treading the well-worn path of museum ethics and repatriation issues, Chip Colwell does something unique and captivating: he shows us what these objects/entities mean to people. Whereas many books and articles have investigated museum policies and practices from an ethical standpoint, Colwell largely avoids making assertions about what museums should do. Instead, through powerful vignettes, he demonstrates how complicated these issues are to navigate in consideration of the various stakes. In making this book about the multiple meanings of cultural heritage to their various stakeholders, he broadens the scope of its reach to hopefully include many people that otherwise might not read a museum studies book focused on repatriation. This fresh take will hopefully inspire others within this field to approach the issue in a more complex and considerate way, one that attempts to build bridges between stakeholders, rather than burning them down.

References

Mead, M. 1928. *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization*. New York: William Morrow & Company.