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Make the Stones Shout: Contemporary museums and the challenge of culture

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Primitivism has proven a tough beast to slay. We should not be surprised to encounter it lurking within the 1948 headlines of the Illustrated London News' shock revelation that a British Museum exhibition of ancient sculpture from the Kingdom of Ife, in today's Nigeria, showed "Donatellas [sic.] of Medieval Africa. African Art worthy to rank with the finest works of Italy and Greece." But such Eurocentrism wouldn't be tolerated today – would it? In fact we note the same attitude informing the Telegraph's review of a 2010 re-installation of this same art at the British Museum once more. This reviewer notes that "These West African sculptors reveal an empathy with the 'other' that you only find in the art of highly advanced cultures": as if the notion of empathy and an 'advanced' culture were extraordinary and unexpected in an African context. Elsewhere the reviewer observes with apparent amazement that these sculptures were produced, after all, in Africa more than 100 years prior to Donatello. We can discern a great deal about an institution from its framing of an exhibition, and the Kingdom of Ife exhibition (which ran until 4 July 2010) is highly revealing of the British Museum's current repositioning of itself in relation to its commitment to Indigenous cultures and, by extension, the current repositioning of Indigenous artifacts in museum collections throughout the world.

The British Museum is, in the first instance of course, well aware of its historic complicity in reinforcing such notions of Western superiority. Museums of the past did this, in the first instance, by marginalizing non-Western cultures – by objectifying them, for example, in a manner that would have been inconceivable for the art and culture of the West. One particularly glaring way that this was undertaken was via the placement of skeletal remains and other contentious and culturally sensitive items taken from Indigenous peoples and then displayed in glass cabinets and habitat dioramas in anthropological and natural history museums the world over. The exhibition of the nineteenth century Tasmanian Aboriginal elder Truganini's bones in Hobart's Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery as representative of the "last Tasmanian Aborigine" constitutes a particularly infamous example. It was not until 1976 that Truganini's own wishes were finally honored and her remains were removed from the museum, cremated and then scattered over the waters of

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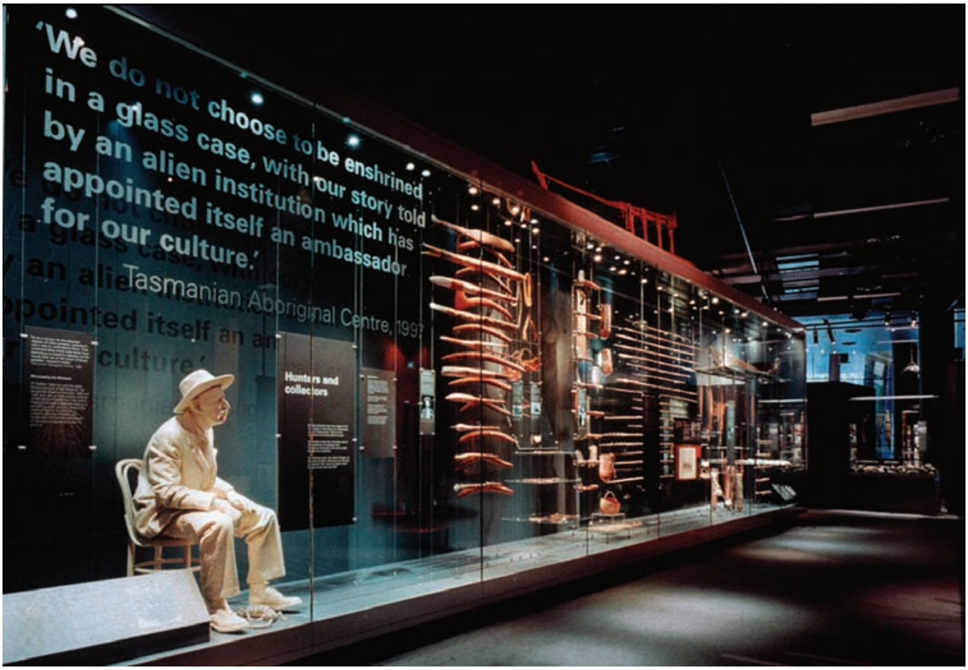
'We do not choose to be enshrined
in a glass case, with our story told
by an alien institution which has
appointed itself an ambassador
for our culture.'
Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, 1997
Hunters and collectors

Figure 1. Spencer Cabinet, Two Laws exhibition, Bunjilaka permanent exhibition, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, Photograph courtesy of Design Craft Furniture Pry Ltd.

the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, as she had always wanted, nearly 100 years after her death (Smith 1980).[1] This historic moment of restitution coincided with the initial steps taken by Indigenous communities in a long and painful process aimed at identifying human remains in museums around the world and then requesting their return to their source communities, an ongoing process that involves scores of museums, including the British Museum, whose reticence in countenancing claims for human remains has been noteworthy.[2]

Contemporary museums deploy a range of strategies to indicate their far greater sensitivity towards these issues today. At the Melbourne Museum, in Southern Australia, a recently initiated display directly addresses the troubled history of colonial collecting that underpins the museum's history (Figure 1). It commences with a quotation taken from a statement issued by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre in 1997, made in the light of the bitter history of the disrespectful display of Truganini's remains among other injustices:

> We do not choose to be enshrined in a glass case, with our story told by an alien institution which has appointed itself an ambassador for our culture.

The accompanying display focuses on the disputed legacy of the Anglo-Australian anthropologist, Walter Baldwin Spencer, who was the Museum of Victoria's director from 1899–1928 and who presided over the accession of a large part of its Indigenous collections. The contemporary Spencer display turns the tables on this history by recasting Spencer as a diorama figure in full-length effigy that has now become cast adrift as a hapless specimen imprisoned within his own collector's cabinet. In so doing, the display ritually dethrones its founding father, installing him in a museological form of the stocks.

This is certainly a direct and uncompromising strategy for registering the contemporary museum's guilt about its colonial past. But how might museums address the more subtle – and thus more insidious – ways that they have marginalized Indigenous cultures in the past? One of the major means by which they did this was via the "science" of ethnography with its tendency to place the art and artifacts of Indigenous peoples at the outer limits of the canons of cultural significance that are conveyed to the visitor by the relative positioning of different cultural groups in gallery arrangements within a museum. This marginalization occurred most forthrightly at the British Museum in the 1960s when it banished its collections of Indigenous cultures to an annex institution of "ethnographic" artifacts, entitled the Museum of Mankind (Coombes 1994: 102–19), away from the glories of Greece and other cultures in the main galleries at Bloomsbury. The title of this new annex museum established a clear hierarchy of cultural value between the British Museum's partitioned collections. As a museum of "mankind," the annex museum was designated as a repository for the "lower" and more "primitive" artifacts issuing from "traditional" societies. Bloomsbury was correspondingly reserved for the supposedly more advanced and lastingly significant cultural achievements of Western civilization and those other ancient cultures (such as Japan or Ancient Assyria) that were readily assimilatable within its framework of significance. (A guide book from the period accordingly describes the Bloomsbury exhibitions as "more prestigious" than those at the Museum of Mankind's (Wilson 1989: 8)).

This split between civilized art and culture, on the one hand, and the ethnography of the "primitive," on the other, also happened the world over. I myself recall the feeling of neo-Primitivist shock that I experienced as a teenager in the early 1980s when, descending into the basement of Sydney's Art Gallery of New South Wales in search of the lavatories, I stumbled upon a darkened netherworld filled with a cluttered array of Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander burial poles framed erratically in the semi-darkness. It was as if the Gallery simply didn't know what to do with these unsettling "ethnographic" objects, but felt nonetheless duty bound to display them somehow. The irony of these works' evident power and primacy – a primacy that also seemed self-evidently relevant to an Australian institution poised on the verge of the Bicentennial – but which had nonetheless been banished to a semi-storage collection in its basement, was not lost even on my teenage consciousness and I well recall my feeling of comparative disappointment when I ascended to the main galleries once again and noted the relative enfeeblement of the Australian-Edwardian paintings placed so much more prominently and respectfully on the ground floor above them.

In Australian museums at least, a reversal of this process has now taken place. The 2003 redevelopment of the Australian galleries of the National Gallery of Victoria, for example, placed the Indigenous collections on the new ground floor galleries next to the entrance and thus before the other collections of non-Indigenous Australian art on the first and second floors above. Similarly, the National Gallery of Australia, which is currently nearing the end of a four-year project aimed at expanding its entrance, has based this undertaking around a proposal for a series of ten new naturally lit Indigenous art galleries to greet visitors as they enter the Gallery.[3]

The ongoing process of re-emphasizing the centrality and vitality of global Indigenous cultures is also evident at the British Museum. It has been more than a decade now since the closure of the Museum of Mankind and the subsequent reintegration of its Indigenous collections back into the main galleries at Bloomsbury. The now largely discredited title of Ethnography has also been removed from the title of the Department charged with the oversight of these collections, which has accordingly been renamed the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas (a title that is still problematic in the huge range and diversity of cultures that it encapsulates, but at least represents a step in the right direction). The centre-piece to the museum's new approach to presenting these

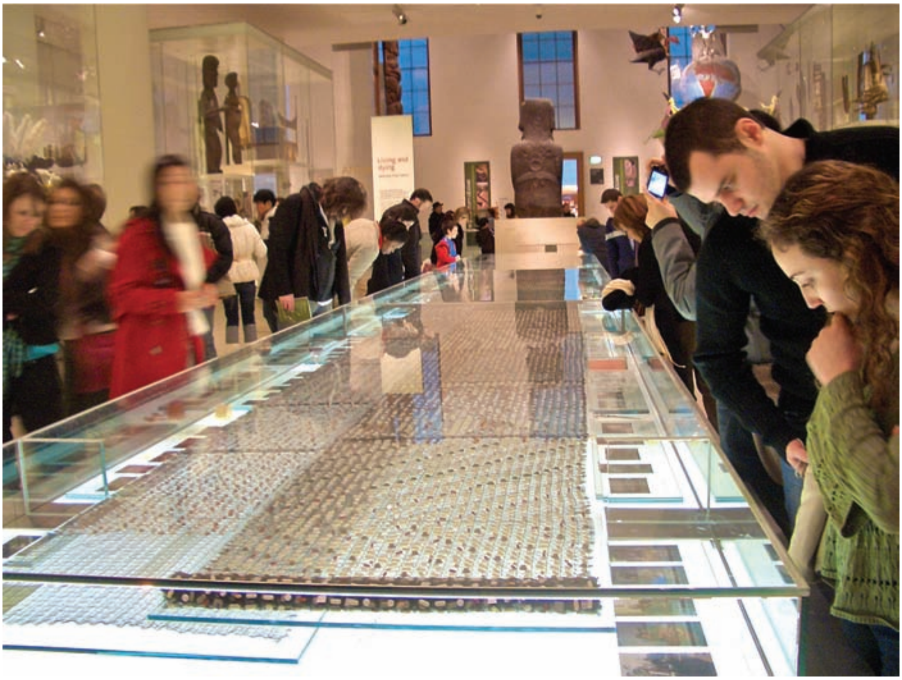

Figure 2. Cradle to Grave display, Living and Dying permanent exhibition, the British Museum, London, Photograph: author.

works in the context of a more holistic and less exclusionary definition of world cultures is the Living and Dying exhibition at the Wellcome Trust Gallery that opened in 2003. This gallery adopts an innovative cross-cultural examination of how different world cultures deal with the universal preoccupations of illness, danger, death and dying. The works on display range from Sri Lanka to the Solomon Islands, but so as not to entirely exoticize the "other" of non-Western cultures, an evident care has also been taken to include a comparative emphasis on Western cultural attitudes.

This is to the fore in an especially innovative commissioned artwork, Cradle to Grave by the collaborative artists, Pharmacopoeia (Figure 2). This piece, which runs down the centre of the Living and Dying Gallery, comprises a woven fabric lined with over 14,000 prescription drugs: the estimated average number of prescription drugs issued to every person in Britain during their lifetime.[4]

The recent Kingdom of Ife exhibition also makes manifest these new attitudes. To begin with the exhibition has been framed explicitly not as an old-style Imperialist Anglo-experts speaking to the rest of the world kind of exercise, but rather as a more mutually respectful cross-cultural collaboration between Britain and Nigeria with a strong concomitant emphasis on Nigerian cultural recognition and self-determination. The exhibition accordingly forms the centerpiece of the British Museum's 2010 Africa Program developed in partnership with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, who have also loaned the majority of the works on display. The exhibition is also careful to reinforce the contemporary cultural and political relevance of the works. The promotional material that accompanies the exhibition accordingly notes the significance of the sculptures for twentieth century notions of Pan-African unity, noting, for example, the use of the so-called ori olokun head as the logo for the All Africa games held in Lagos in 1973.[5] The contemporary relevance of these ancient sculptures is also underscored by a series of public programs devised to accompany the exhibition. Foremost among these was a public forum, organized in partnership with The Guardian and held on 8 June 2010, entitled “Nigeria: Africa’s Superpower?” which formed part, in turn, of a wider series of events planned to coincide with the 50th anniversary of African Independence. There can be no question, then, but that the Kingdom of Ife exhibition represents a scrupulously planned and thoughtfully implemented, multi-faceted initiative that speaks volumes about the sea change that has occurred in recent years in contemporary museums of world cultures.

And yet the British Museum can only go so far in this direction since it is held back in other respects by still unresolved issues stemming from its institutional history and custodial legacies. Its position with respect to its holdings of human remains sourced from Indigenous communities has already been noted. Equally significant has been its decision to act as one of the prime signatories to the 2002 Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums. This document purported to speak for all museums and sought to reiterate the importance in the modern world of universal survey museums acting as a kind of neo-Enlightenment space for undertaking comparative cultural analysis of objects in a manner that would not be possible elsewhere.[6] Yet its real purpose – as never directly mentioned but present, by implication, in its every word – was pre-emptively to rebut repatriation claims by former subaltern states with a counter-argument signed by a number of the world’s most powerful and high profile institutions. As the Chair of the ICOM Ethics Committee, Geoffrey Lewis, noted:

> The real purpose of the Declaration was, however, to establish a higher degree of immunity from claims for the repatriation of objects from the collections of these museums. The presumption that a museum with universally defined objectives may be considered exempt from such demands is specious. The Declaration is a statement of self-interest, made by a group representing some of the world’s richest museums; they do not, as they imply, speak for the “international museum community.” (Lewis 2004: 3)

In the case of the British Museum, of course, the elephant in the gallery, as it were, is the Parthenon sculptures that have been at the centre of repatriation claims from almost the time of their installation at the museum in 1819 (Figure 3). The British Museum’s case for retaining the Sculptures is generally presented as being that keeping them in London allows them to be appreciated in the broadest possible context – that of world culture and “the universal legacy of Ancient Greece” – whereas in Athens they could be appreciated only in a more restricted sense “within the context of ancient Greek and Athenian history.”[7]

This may be so but what is seldom acknowledged in such pronouncements is the tremendous significance that the Parthenon Sculptures still hold – and therefore how great a loss they would be were they to return to Greece – for the British Museum itself as an institution. The very basis of Robert Smirke’s scrupulously neo-classical architectural design for the museum is, after all, the ideal of the museum as temple, as derived from a detailed study of Graeco-Roman temple architecture in general and the Parthenon in particular. The Parthenon Galleries that serve as the display setting for the Sculptures today take this obvious reference one step further. When John Russell Pope came to create new purpose built galleries for the Sculptures in the 1930s (thus replacing the older and smaller galleries designed by Smirke from 1819–32) he rendered the link yet more explicit by inserting colossal free-standing Doric columns at the four corners of the gallery that are

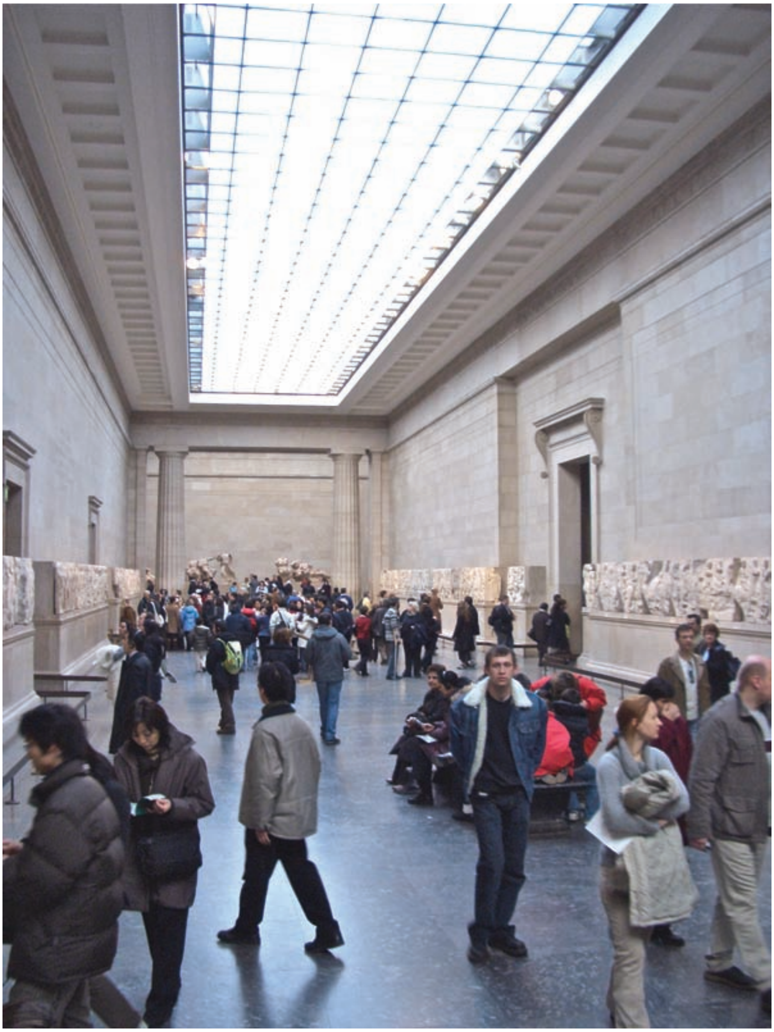

Figure 3. Parthenon Sculptures Gallery, the British Museum, London, Photograph: author.

based directly on those of the Parthenon. The Parthenon and its sculptures are thus written into the very fabric of the British Museum.

This architectural centrality grows, in turn, out of the central role that the Sculptures have been afforded at the British Museum as foundational records of the museum's own traditional notion of its charter as enshrining the great canon of Western civilization. A sense of their centrality in this respect comes in an influential report written in 1928 by Sir John Davidson Beazley, Professor of Classical Archaeology and Art at Oxford University, together with Donald Robertson, Professor of Greek at Cambridge and Bernard Ashmole, Professor of Archaeology at London University. This report (which acted as a guide for the design of the new Parthenon Sculpture galleries in the 1930s) notes that the gallery that contains the Parthenon sculptures is "not an ordinary room in an ordinary museum … it is one of the central places of earth … We are given an opportunity of proving that we are worthy of our trust: that we are conscious of our duty to the works themselves, and to the noble civilization, mother of our own, that produced them" (Beazley, Robertson & Ashmole 1929: n.p.).

When building the new galleries in the 1930s, then, Pope and his contemporaries viewed themselves as the natural heirs of the Parthenon – its children no less. Now, however, the museum's authority to claim this lineage has been challenged by Greece, which has created its own rival claimant to this legacy. This sleek and contemporary re-conceptualization of the old Acropolis Museum, designed by Bernard Tschumi and opened in June 2009, makes an instructive point of comparison with the British Museum for the very different ideal that it conveys of the museum in a contemporary setting (Bernard Tschumi Architects 2009). Architecturally speaking, Pope's Parthenon Galleries function in a very traditional sense as a kind of inner sanctum – or cella – set deep within the temple of the British Museum. They are accordingly deliberately isolated from the world outside as a kind of sancta sanctorum – as indeed they are also set apart from the rest of the museum since they are positioned on their own axis and situated at the end of the ground floor galleries on the far Western perimeter of the museum. The new Parthenon galleries of the Acropolis Museum, by contrast, are presented in a diametrically opposed sense as outwardly facing and integrated with the rest of the museum and with Athens more generally.

The first thing that strikes one when contrasting the old Parthenon displays with the new ones at Athens is that Tschumi's new Parthenon Galleries differ from the other levels of the Acropolis Museum in that, unlike the other galleries, they have been constructed transparently as a kind of floating pavilion on the top floor that acts above all else as a frame for the Parthenon itself (Figure 4). The Parthenon, perched as it is on the Acropolis hill above the Acropolis Museum, is thus always present in the narratives created by Tschumi's displays in the museum below either implicitly but often also directly visually accessible on the other side of the glass. Of course, the ideological message that is conveyed by this emphasis is that this sleek and contemporary transparent gallery bathed in Attic sunlight and in immediate communication with the Acropolis' earlier remains in the galleries below and with the Parthenon directly above it is now able to stake a claim as the natural and inevitable repository for the Sculptures in a way that the closed, isolated and traditionalist orientation of the British Museum's old Parthenon displays could never hope to achieve. So it is that the new Acropolis Museum presents itself as the natural site for the Parthenon sculptures: a place for museum objects to be understood in context, as archaeological records in direct connection with the local archaeological sites and the present day lived environment that give them wider meaning.

It remains to be seen whether this beautifully presented contemporary space will have the power over time to persuade the floods of modern day visitors to the museum of the greater legitimacy of the Greek standpoint. The museological arguments for and against Athens versus London over the coming months and years will accordingly hinge on the following polemically opposed positions: Athens will argue for its greater validity in resituating the Sculptures within their "natural" setting of the ancient and modern civic structure of Athens. They will accordingly focus on "reunifying" the marbles, rather than repatriating them, as is evident in the greater prevalence of the term reunification used in current contexts in favor of the Athenian position.[8] Alternatively, the British Museum will continue to articulate the museological Enlightenment ideal that "collections are the possession of world citizens" and that, as such, "the notion of place of our art, their art, our history, their history, is simply not sustainable" (McGregor 2009: 65 and 70). In truth, both arguments have their difficulties. The new Acropolis Museum's position carries with it an attendant emphasis on an essentially abstract notion of the purity of cultural origins and a belief in the ability of nations to

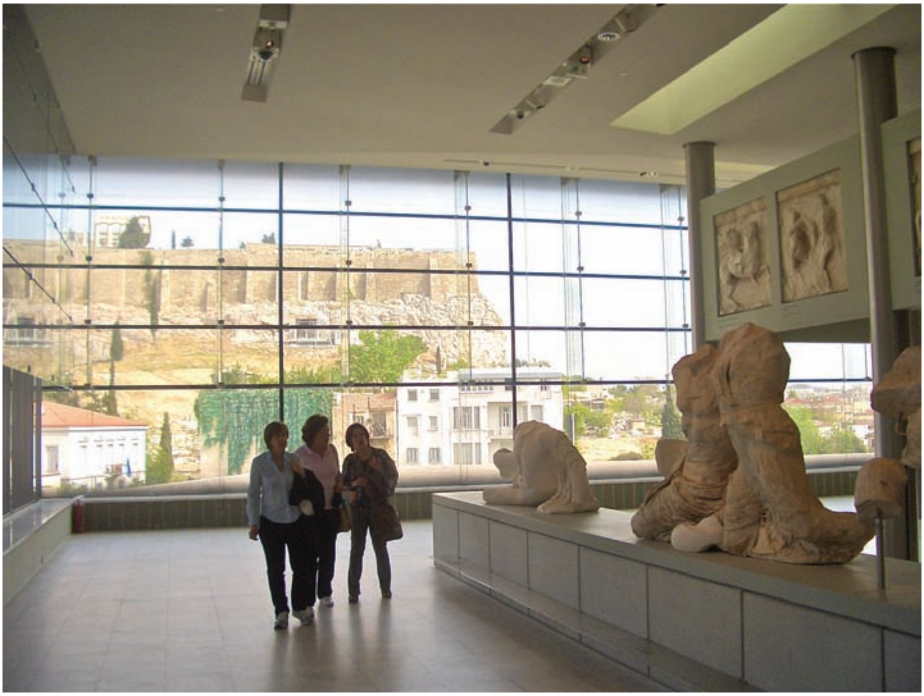

Figure 4. Parthenon Gallery, the Acropolis Museum, Athens, Photograph: author.

regain an ahistorical “wholeness” and integration of their collections and cultures that is belied by the complex translation and fragmentation of objects and cultures across time and place. Conversely, one of the chief problems underlying the British Museum’s position is the extent to which it fails to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in any institutional claim to be able to speak on behalf of “world citizens” everywhere, while simultaneously denying them the agency to answer back on their own terms.

Will it ever prove possible to resolve this dispute in a manner that goes beyond such fixed polarities and moves, instead, towards a more gray – and complex – area of negotiated settlement and compromise? Would it be possible, for example, for both parties to relinquish their “winner takes all” position and work towards a circuit breaker process aimed at a negotiated partial restitution and complementary exchange of artifacts and exhibitions over time? Perhaps not. But then again, a model has been developed recently for a comparable process of politically negotiated settlement between governments and museums. This is, of course, the long and arduous negotiations conducted recently between the Greek and Italian governments, on the one hand, and a group of prestigious American museums, on the other, that were found to have received in the past a number of illegally acquired antiquities, including some of the signature pieces from their collections.[9]

Although undoubtedly painful and costly for all parties involved, this process has nonetheless resulted in a number of positive outcomes, not the least of which is a series of new accords signed between the museums in question and the Italian cultural ministries aimed at fostering increased collaborations and exchange of objects and projects over time. So, for example, the Getty Museum has relinquished ownership of forty objects, but has gained in return a range of new initiatives including a major collaborative exhibition, Between Greece and Rome: Sicily in the Classical and Hellenistic Period, to be organized in conjunction with the Dipartimento dei beni culturali e dell’identità siciliana and scheduled for 2013. Likewise, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has agreed to transfer ownership of thirteen of its antiquities to Italy, but in return has been able to enjoy the extended loan of a magnificent Hellenistic statue, fittingly enough of Eirene, the Goddess of Peace.

It would undoubtedly be difficult – perhaps even impossible – for the Greek government and the British Museum to pursue a similar path in the future. Impossible perhaps for the Greek government, since it would entail their having to forego the notion of a complete ‘reunification’ of the Sculptures, and impossible perhaps also for the British Museum since it would necessitate their giving up the central prominence played by at least some of the key works in their collection, particularly in terms of their traditional definition as repository of the highpoints of the Western canon. But, as the Assessore Generale of the Sicilian Ministry pointed out in relation to the recent agreement with the Getty Museum, a paradigm shift along these lines could help to move the two sides beyond issues of “mere restitution” and on to a deeper and more multi-layered engagement with the idea “of mutually beneficial and effective collaboration” between governments and museums. Conversely, we have also noted the significant strides already taken by the British Museum in moving beyond their earlier Eurocentric emphasis in favor of a more embracive and diverse commitment to global cultures more generally. So, if any agreement of this type does eventuate – however remote and even hypothetical in the future it may remain – it might even prove to be a blessing in disguise.

Notes

1. For the display of Truganini’s remains at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in the context of Indigenous material culture and museums more generally see Cove (1995) and Simpson (1996).
2. For a recent discussion see Nafziger (2009). For a discussion of current legislation and initiatives surrounding the issue from the broader perspective of the display of human remains more generally see Alberti, Bienkowski, Chapman and Drew (2009). For the British Museum’s policy on Human Remains and documentation of two recent instances of repatriation to Tasmania and New Zealand see “Human Remains,” accessible at: http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/news_and_press_releases/statements/human_remains.aspx.
3. For the National Gallery of Australia’s Indigenous Galleries and New Entrance Project see http://nga.gov.au/AboutUs/building/index.cfm.
4. For information see http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/c/cradle_to_grave.aspx.
5. The British Museum, 2010 Press Releases: Kingdom of Ife: Sculptures from West Africa, accessible at: http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/news_and_press_releases/press_releases/2010/kingdom_of_ife.aspx.
6. This argument was expanded upon by the British Museum’s current Director, for which see McGregor (2009) 65–70.
7. “The Parthenon Sculptures: the position of the Trustees of the British Museum,” accessible at: http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/news_and_press_releases/statements/the_parthenon_sculptures/parthenon_-_trustees_statement.aspx.
8. See, for example, the International Association for the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures, accessible at: http://www.parthenoninternational.org/ and the American Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures, accessible at: http://www.parthenonmarblesusa.org/parthenon/home.aspx.
9. For a recent overview of the case and its implications for American museums see Bonn-Muller and Powell (2007: 34–39). For the Getty Museum see “Antiquities: Working Towards a Just Resolution,” accessible at:

http://www.getty.edu/news/antiquities.html. For more recent developments see further Getty Press Release, dated 17 February 2009: "J. Paul Getty Museum and Sicilian Ministry of Culture and Sicilian Identity Announce Major Long-Term Collaboration," accessible at: http://www.getty.edu/news/press/center/sicily_announcement_0210.html. For the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, see the press release dated 28 September 2006, "An Agreement with the Ministry of Culture," accessible at: http://www.mfa.org/collections/index.asp?key=2656; "An Agreement with the Ministry of Culture," ibid.

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