



Reseñas / Reviews

Carla Jaimes Betancourt, Karoline Noack & Naomi Rattunde (eds.): *Global turns, descolonización y museos*. Bonn Americanist Studies 56. Bonn, La Paz: BASS, Plural editores. 2020.

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During my university years, after the closing event of the first conference I had ever helped organize, a professor told me in a somehow haunting tone: “sometimes one organizes conferences around topics that inevitably will leave you unsatisfied”. I was not sure, at that time, if I agreed. I am, however, sure now that I do disagree. I figured that some topics, such as “decolonization”, refer to arduous and still relatively young processes that take place against the backdrop of over 500 years of colonization and hardened ideological and institutional structures. Thus, it is very likely that because of this condition of historic asymmetry, engaging with and thinking about how to put processes of decolonization into practice will inevitably lead to some moments of frustration. Nevertheless, it is perseverance that will eventually show if such a thing as decolonization is actually possible in the context of museums, their collections, and universities.

It is one of the merits of the book “*Global turns, descolonización y museos*” (Engl.: *Global turns, decolonization and museums*) to look at such efforts –efforts to decolonize museum practices— on a mid to long term scale, making use of Fernand Braudel’s concept of *longue durée* and understanding these efforts as part of and responses to larger global and historical developments.

In 2018 the Department for the Anthropology of the Americas at the University of Bonn organized the homonymous seminar during the visit of Juan Villanueva Criales, Chief of Investigations at the Museum of Ethnography and Folklore (MUSEF) in La Paz, Bolivia, as a guest lecturer. The essay collection published within the series Bonn Americanist Studies (BAS) and with La Paz’s publishing house Plural editores now registers some of the main content lines of the 2018 event and synthesizes them in a presentation text by the editors and an excellent introduction written by Karoline Noack (Director of BASA Museum, University of Bonn). These content lines are exemplified and further developed in eleven specific case scenarios that draw a map of global institutions and

research engaging with processes of decolonization in numerous museums, universities, and collections both in Europe and South America.

The choice of creating such cartography of interrelations, of common objectives, and differing historical backgrounds, allows the reader to understand some fundamental approaches on “decolonization and museums”: the histories behind singular collections, and relations between museums and indigenous populations, for example, might be multi-layered and more complex than one might be drawn to think in the first place. Often there might be more agents involved and invisible –even personal– relations at stake than a unilateral relation of an oppressive colonizer and an oppressed colonized might suggest. In that sense, the book’s primary result is to inform and give the reader a chance to understand the complexity of the topic announced in the title –global turns, decolonization, and museums– by unfolding the many heterogeneous case studies presented here. Thus, rather than proposing one satisfying solution to the problem of colonialism and the contemporary condition of collections, the book offers a bundle of loose threads that may lead us to think, and to rethink, what exactly a practice of decolonization could consist of. So, instead of offering a potential manual for decolonizing a museum collection, the volume rather leaves the reader confronted with many problems and poses more questions than one could possibly have had before opening the book. Acknowledging this as a reader, or scholar, or museum worker, is to understand that in terms of decolonization, there is still much work to do, and perhaps, the discourses on decolonization that have been intersecting with discourses of contemporary museum practices in recent years, are only the tip of the iceberg of problems we will still have to face in the future.

In that sense, the book confronts us with the fact that museums have had different functions during different moments in history and that significant changes of these functions often are inseparable from so-called “global turns”, the latter referring to “points or moments of inflection in processes of globalization”, or in global history. As such, they refer to collections as markers of “connected histories” –with a before and after– and allow us to situate the before-mentioned historical asymmetries against the backdrop of a plurality of perspectives, and thus open the way for new narratives, new ways of understanding, and potentially with chances to unravel the hidden histories behind the singularity of each and every object that is part of a museum collection. In short: every object that is part of a collection is relational to the historical markers that have determined its identity and its function, both before and after entering the museum – historical markers susceptible to political conjunctures as well as to redefinitions of ownership, for example. As Noack claims in her introduction, to comprehend the shifts in meaning that come along with those global turns as horizontal movements on a network of interconnected histories (plural), rather than vertical subordination of a linear and euro-centric understanding of history (singular), is the first step necessary to understand the colonizing function of institutions such as museums, and enable them to start thinking of what a process of decolonization could actually consist of.

The volume's success lies in taking this introductory hypothesis –that could be considered a fundamental epistemic insight– and unfold it with each of the presented case studies, adding concrete problems to it, problems taken out of concrete museum practices with its specific local contexts. Particularly positive about the outcome is that with its publication in Bolivia, thus in the Spanish speaking context, it has also been made accessible for a regional reality that, despite a very well explored history of political decolonization and anti-colonial struggles, suffers a severe lack of published museum histories and analysis of museum practices. As such, it will effortlessly find its place in the fields of education and in contemporary discourses on restitution politics, as well as on the tasks of public institutions –museums, universities, and their collections– within (post-)colonial contexts and regarding their interconnected colonial histories.

Global turns, descolonización y museos (2020), edited by Carla Jaimes Betancourt, Karoline Noack, and Naomi Rattunde, is published by Bonner Altamerika-Sammlung und Studien (BASS) e.V. and the La Paz based publishing house Plural editores as volume 56 of the series Bonn Americanist Studies (BAS); 246 pp., 46 color images. The book is divided in three parts: 1) "Investigation of the legacies – perspectives of museums and university collections in Europe"; 2) "Indigenous populations and museums – Knowledge, experiences and collaborations"; and 3) "Passing through time and space – Visions of change and the global turns", and counts with contributions of Karoline Noack (BASA Museum, University Bonn), Claudia Augustat (Weltmuseum, Vienna), Naomi Rattunde (University Bonn), Dagmar Schweizer de Palacios (University of Marburg), Andrés Gutiérrez Usillos (Museo de América, Madrid), Juan Villanueva Criales (MUSEF, La Paz), Diego Ballesteros, Marina L. Sardi, María M. Reca (Museo de La Plata), Adriana Muñoz (SMVK National Museums of World Culture, Gothenburg), Carla Jaimes Betancourt (BASA Museum, University Bonn), Andrea Scholz (Ethnological Museum, SPK Berlin), and Silvia Dolz (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden).