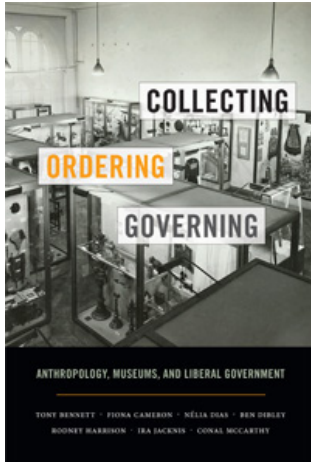


REVIEWS



Alexandra ION

Collecting, Ordering, Governing. Anthropology Museums and Liberal Government

[by Tony Bennet et al.]

Duke University Press
ISBN: 9780822362531
360 pages

“In their bodies is the record of their brotherhood”
(Bennett et al. 2017, p. 256)

This collective volume is an addition to a recent large body of literature which discusses the legacy of colonial encounters, and the ways in which anthropological practices of collecting have been embedded in political or scientific power relations (e.g. Baker 2010; Conklin 2013; Edwards 2012; Redman 2016). In this case, the analysis is placed at the cross-roads of museum studies and history of anthropology, with case studies spanning around 50 years. The reader is taken from the 1898-99 Torres Strait Island expedition, through the displays at Musée de l’Homme, or the Maori Ethnology Gallery (Dominion Museum, 1936), to the mid-century ‘The Race Question’ declaration on the fallacies of the race concept — and the subsequent critical reactions. The seven authors of this book try to develop an original perspective in exposing the specificities of the ‘museum phase of anthropology’, by understanding how in these different settings the cultural conceptions of difference have been articulated as a result of particular power configurations. By moving the focus between anthropologists in the field, to exhibitions, between biopolitical framings of local groups to international scientific networks, from photographs to texts, the authors propose

a rethinking of the role of anthropology in 'mediating the relations between the collecting practices of fieldwork, the ordering practices of museums, and the practices of social governance' (p. 255).

The broad chronological and geographical framework offers the readers an interesting comparative perspective on the topics discussed. After an Introduction which presents the general theoretical framework, as well as the aims of the volume, Chapter 1 delves into the history of anthropological practices through four 'vignettes' organised around emblematic museum exhibits: the one imagined by Baldwin Spencer at the National Museum of Victoria, Franz Boas's Hall of the Northwest Coast Indians at the American Museum of Natural History, the Senegal vitrine at the Musée de l'Homme, and the Maori displays at Wellington's Dominion Museum. Chapter 2, one of the most interesting reads in the volume, presents contrasting 'rationalities of governance' in two Australian administrated territories — spaces in which anthropological inquiries have led to very different governing measures. In the next chapter, the authors look at a different and thought-provoking case-study, that of 'anthropology at home': the ethnographic surveys of the UK between 1892-1899, and 1937-1945. Chapter 4 focuses on Franz Boas, and collecting practices in Africa, Oceania and Asia in a USA context. The following study takes the readers to New Zealand, and provokes them to view this space as a 'distinctive anthropological assemblage', while in Chapter 6 we are back on the European continent, surveying anthropology in France. The volume ends with a text in which traditional conclusions are replaced with a reflection on the legacies of these past anthropological practices, by discussing more recent preoccupations with the concepts of indigeneity, culture, or race.

While the ambitious aims of this volume and the vast range of resources analysed, from historical information to archival documents, are to be applauded, unfortunately the arguments throughout are rather hard to follow. The strength of the volume definitely lies in its comparative perspective, and the fine-grained cases which paint a nuanced story of anthropological encounters. Though these historical case studies are interesting and rich in potential, the theoretical apparatus seems to hinder the flow of the argument. In order to build a bridge between the multiple levels of the

narrative, and to bring together museums, objects, and individuals, the authors based their analysis on a range of sociological, and material culture studies inspired concepts, such as: Bruno Latour's oligoptic technologies, Michele Foucault's 'transactional realities', 'laboratories of governmentality', and biopolitics, Jacques Derrida's (and others) assemblage theory, and many more. While using such concepts can be a valid and even fruitful approach at times, here this theoretical apparatus seems overpowering, making it difficult to follow the links between the many different concepts employed — 'extractive colonialism', 'transactional realities', 'epistemic circulation', 'fieldwork agencement', 'object-types', 'frontier sexuality', 'immutable and combinable mobiles' etc. —, sometimes in the same section:

Oligoptica function through the associations made possible by the existence of multiple, overlapping visual spaces that facilitate rigorous inspection of the parts as a whole. Building on this notion, Otter (2008) has charted the history of the development of a Victorian oligoptic visual economy, in which the liberal subject became increasingly implicated in practices of self-observation, alongside the development of a series of materially heterogenous technologies of illumination and visibility that facilitated interconnected practices of collective, individual, and practical inspection. (Bennett et al. 2017, p. 109).

In such instances, it does not feel that such theoretical excursus add value to the general argument. Maybe for the clarity and strength of arguments the authors could have picked just a handful of concepts and follow them through the book. In doing so, the links between the chapters could have also been deepened.

Even though the book is presented as a collective authorial endeavour, the chapters read more like stand-alone pieces. In this respect I feel that the authors were not fully successful in their attempt to overcome the fact that some of the texts have been previously published as standalone pieces. To create a more flowing narrative, it might have helped if, in their effort to place the visual culture of science within the wider political networks, the authors had chosen a focal point — e.g. the museum —, and

to follow throughout its 'role in essentialising difference' had they quoted Lynch and Alberti (2010, 14). Along the same lines, though the book is clearly eruditely written, at times it is harder to follow for someone who is not very familiar with the characters, or the historical episodes discussed, as there is very little background historical information given. However, it should be mentioned that the case studies themselves are amply discussed.

It would have also been interesting to see a more in depth narrative on the rich repertoire of photographs, as the analysis of the visual cultures of collecting seems to be one of the strengths of the volume. Reading through the extended photographs captions definitely makes an entertaining, educative, and thought-provoking read: from 'Norman and Norma, the average American boy and girl' – two naked plaster sculptures which were meant to depict the ideal body type of the average American as a testimony of progress and culture (p. 168-169) – to the photo of a suspended costume which sat next to three mounted skulls, black and white photographs, and metal implements, and meant to showcase in a scientific manner the Senegal at Musée du quai Branly (p. 18), or the diorama at the American Museum of Natural History (p.14) showcasing an Indian family involved in domestic activities, and surrounded by material culture.

All in all, this volume can bring useful information to anthropologists, museum specialists, and historians of anthropology, provided that they are already familiar with the general outline of the histories of anthropological collecting. Maybe the most important contribution of this work to the wider academic and social discussions on anthropology and colonialism is its balanced and nuanced approach. In the current landscape in which the label 'Anthropology is a white colonialist project' seems self-sufficient, and oftentimes even marks the end of the conversation (see Hage's 2017 critique), this book takes an informative and refined approach by showing how, when viewed from the ground, many of these stories are more complex, and varied. In this respect, the discussions around 'The Race Question' declaration, Chapter 2, or the analysis of a photograph depicting the mural at the entrance of the Wellington Government Court (part of the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, 1940), which might first appear as a 'classic

statement of assimilation', though at the time the Maori actually viewed it as a sign of identity and independence (p. 207), are but a few illuminating examples.

References

- Baker, L. D. 2010. *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Conklin, A. L. 2013. *In the Museum of Man. Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850–1950*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Edwards, E. 2012. *Photography, Anthropology and History. Expanding the Frame. Edited by Christopher Morton*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Hage, G. 2017. Anthropology is a white colonialist project' can't be the end of the conversation. September 4. <https://mediadiversified.org/2017/09/04/anthropology-is-a-white-colonialist-project-cant-be-the-end-of-the-conversation/>
- Lyncha, B. T., and Alberti, S. J.M.M. 2010. Legacies of prejudice: racism, co-production and radical trust in the museum. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 25 (1): 13-35.
- Redman, S. J. 2016. *Bone Rooms. From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.