

# **Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation (Turner)**

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## **Abstract**

This work is a book review considering the title *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation* by Hannah Turner (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020).

## **Keywords**

anthropology; cataloging; classification; colonialism; history; material culture; museum archives.

## **Competing Interests**

The author declares no competing interests.

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## Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation (Turner)

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For those that work within the “behind-the-scenes” areas of museum spaces, the tangible and intangible products of bureaucratic documentation processes are hard—if not impossible—to ignore. They burst out of filing cabinets, rest in archival folders, clutter computer hard drives, or await discovery at the bottom of mysterious piles in the corners of offices. It is these (mostly) material manifestations of museum documentation that Hannah Turner takes as the subject of inquiry in *Cataloging Culture*. Fortuitously, I encountered Turner’s examination of the productive and reproductive powers of documentation while simultaneously re-evaluating the documentation processes of my own museum space. Turner’s analysis of the manifestation and reproduction of colonial ideology in the cataloging and classificatory processes of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) reminds us how these difficult-to-ignore products of museum documentation are not only material traces of previous knowledge production, but also how they continue to reproduce colonial ideologies today.

Drawing from scholars of materiality and networks like John Law, Michel Callon, and Bruno Latour, as well as the work of scholars of museum documentation like Candace Greene and Catherine Nichols, Turner approaches the NMNH Department of Anthropology’s documentation processes as a case study of material durability, or “how colonial thought can become stabilized in material technologies and practices” (p. 14). Turner traced the power of institutional knowledge through long-term archival research in the Department of Anthropology, the Smithsonian Institution Archives, and the National Anthropological Archives, as well as through interviews with department staff. Turner argues that “the museum discursively constructed ethnographic specimens as it recorded and documented them,” which in turn informs the contemporary claims to authority and knowledge made by museums (p. 4).

Turner takes a chronological approach to outlining the layered institutionalization of colonialism, beginning with the origins of the Smithsonian Institution and the

publication of “desiderata” for field collectors (p. 29). Circular lists, such as those produced by George Gibbs in 1861 for archaeological investigations or Otis T. Mason in 1875 for the Philadelphia Exposition, advised researchers and travelers of desired objects to be collected. Importantly, the creators of these lists often classified Indigenous remains alongside the remains of animals and everyday material culture. The object-based epistemology and racism embedded in these lists reproduced and codified the colonial power of early anthropological thought that defined categories of knowledge and classified people. These lists produced the early collections of the Bureau of American Ethnology and Division of Anthropology that now form the basis of the Department of Anthropology at the NMNH today.

Once at the museum, the layered documentation of ethnographic collections only continues. Turner next examines the ledger books at the Smithsonian that systematically execute bureaucratic power by transforming undocumented objects into the materialization of knowledge. Discussions of how the headings changed over time as well as deviations from the standard (such as margin drawings) show how objects “were crafted to become ‘useful’ specimens” by the museum (p. 86). Attempts at organization and systematizing the knowledge associated with collections continued in the subsequent processes of cataloging. Mason’s organizational principles of typology produced an indexable system of card catalogs as well as the standards of “best practice” for documentation that many museums adhere to today. Turner shows how the cataloging process shifted along with the professionalization of the museum field, once drawing from the unsung labor of female secretaries and moving to the typewritten cards with standardized fields still available today.

However, as Turner’s history of practice shows, documentation does not always mean the same thing. William C. Sturtevant furthered the institutionalized practice of description by emphasizing the importance of “well-documented artifacts” for collecting and research (p. 125). Created at the same time as the shift to digital documentation, his *Guide to Field Collecting of Ethnographic Specimens* ([1967] 1969) created the standardized names of communities that permeates much of museum practice today. Turner illustrates how this also created the “problem” of “legacy data,” or “data from earlier typed records and handwritten sources” (p. 126). A familiar phenomenon for museum professionals, Turner shows how the creation of controlled vocabularies, inventory workflows, and data processing standards proved to be a site of negotiation, as well as a site of exclusion that recreated colonial ideologies rather than challenging them. “100-year-old mistakes” (or purposeful categories) in cataloging continue to negatively impact the ability of Indigenous communities to make claims for repatriation (p. 169).

As museums increasingly move to open-access, online models of museum catalogues and databases, Turner’s *Cataloging Culture* reminds museum professionals, scholars, researchers, and collaborators to re-examine cataloging and the documentation it produces as a purposeful creation of museum histories and perspectives rather than a simple collection of data “masquerade[ing] as ‘unmediated’ online access” (p. 189). Turner closes by asking whether any museum—not only the NMNH—could ever create a functional system of documentation based on non-colonial ways of knowing. It is a question I also find myself grappling with while limited by a variety of factors, including the controlled vocabularies of a collections management system, few staff, and time. Still, museum professionals draw from databases almost daily for grant applications, teaching exercises, research, and other necessary museum activities. Collaborative, contribution-based databases such as the Reciprocal Research

Network, Sierra Leone Heritage, and the Quilt Index provide some alternative models to singular-voice databases (see Rowley 2013; Basu 2015; and MacDowell et al. 2013 respectively). Turner's work continues the conversation of collaborative databases by questioning how we can rethink and retool databases established non-collaboratively, over many years of institutional practice and bias. By encouraging those that encounter the many multitudes of museum documentation to question and challenge its knowledge-producing power, *Cataloging Culture* provides excellent reading for museum professionals, scholars, researchers, and students.

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Kristin Otto is Curator of the University Museum at New Mexico State University where she is affiliated with the Department of Anthropology. She has curated multiple museum exhibitions, including *When a Woman Rises: Maya Weavers Creating Connections Through Textiles* at the NMSU University Museum (2021), and *Shapes of the Ancestors: Bodies, Animals, Art, and Ghanaian Fantasy Coffins* at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures (2018). She has published work in *Teaching Sociology* and *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*.