

Refocusing Ethnographic Museums through Oceanic Lenses

Phillip Scorch with Noelle M. K. Y. Kahanu, Sean Mallon, Cristián Moreno Pakarati, Mara Mulrooney, Nina Tonga, and Ty P. Kāwika Tengan. Dunedin, Otago University Press, 2020. RRP: \$49.95, ISBN: 978-1-98-859239-8.

Reviewed by Emalani Case

In *Refocusing Ethnographic Museums through Oceanic Lenses*, Phillip Scorch encourages Kamalu de Preez and Marques Hanalei Marzan, two cultural advisors and specialists at Hawai‘i’s Bishop Museum, to ‘have a conversation with a museum piece of their choice’ and to allow Scorch ‘to become part of it’ (50). Reading their reflections made me think about the many conversations I’ve had with pieces in museums and what they’ve said to me, what they’ve taught me, and what they’ve made me feel. In the Introduction to the book, I am quoted as calling an ‘ahu ‘ula and mahiole (a Hawaiian feathered cloak and helmet that belonged to one of our chiefs, Kalani‘ōpu‘u), a pu‘uhonua, or a place of refuge and sanctuary (6). As a Kanaka Maoli (Hawaiian) living in Wellington, New Zealand, the feathered ‘things’ became my pieces of Hawai‘i far away from home and therefore collectively transformed into a place of cultural safety for me, a place where I could converse with my ancestors in physical form, embodied in the intricate netting, knotting, and feather work.

I open with this brief story not to privilege my own interactions with museum objects over those of others but to emphasize a point made in the book: stories are powerful because they encourage us to engage with the many lenses that are discussed, employed, and practiced in the book’s chapters, and in doing so, help us to see the ‘infinite variety of patterns’ that emerges in the process (179). Recalling Kalani‘ōpu‘u’s treasures, for instance, this book has encouraged me to think about their becoming, or of how two ‘things’ given to Captain Cook that journeyed across oceans and countries became a place of safety for a Hawaiian living away from home, and then became the mea waiwai (treasured things) that have now returned to Hawai‘i in an era where repatriation means something in the context of ongoing decolonisation efforts. Viewing objects in becoming, and thinking about the conversations we have with them, and the conversations they have with each other, is essential in recognizing mana taonga, or ‘the power and authority (mana) that resides in and derives from cultural treasures (taonga),’ a guiding principle and practice at the Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa where Kalani‘ōpu‘u’s chiefly regalia were on display before returning to Hawai‘i. Sharing my intimate and close relationship with our Hawaiian cultural treasures is both to practice what the book encourages others to do while also asking for more of it from the book’s primary researcher, Scorch himself.

As explained in the Introduction to the book, *Refocusing Ethnographic Museums through Oceanic Lenses* sets out to offer insights into Indigenous museologies across Oceania to recalibrate ethnographic museums, collections, and practices through Indigenous Oceanic approaches and perspectives’ (3). In what the authors call ‘layered coauthorship’, the book utilizes a collaborative approach in an effort to get away from token gestures and nods at ‘multiperspectivity’ and to practice what it encourages: working together in the unique cross-cultural spaces and circumstances created in their work (3). While Scorch positions Noelle M. K. Y. Kahanu, Sean Mallon, Cristián Moreno Pakarati, Mara Mulrooney, Nina Tonga, and Ty P. Kāwika Tengan as co-authors, however, it is clear that he is the lead curator of the book’s sections. Thus, as a reader, I had hoped that he would engage in more of the reflexivity that he asks of some of the co-authors.

In a book dedicated to ‘Oceanic lenses’, and one that prioritises Indigeneity—though it is never clarified how the term ‘Indigenous’ is being used despite the fact that it does not have universal function across the region—I would expect the main non-Indigenous author to be more forward about his positionality. Rather than grapple with the personal in the intimate way that some of the co-authors do, and the way he asked the Bishop Museum cultural specialists to do, the onus to do that work falls onto Tonga who, in her critique of Scorch’s work on the Materializing German-Sāmoan Colonial Legacies project, asks how ‘the sole external collaborator [Scorch] who identifies as German’ could attempt to represent a ‘double lens’ when there were no Sāmoan external collaborators (135). I point to this as an example of what Scorch should have done himself: explore his positionality as a non-Indigenous scholar attempting to speak *with* (and at times, *for*) Pacific peoples. Following Tonga’s critique, Mallon also spoke to some of the limitations, institutional and otherwise, of the project Scorch completed at Te Papa Tongarewa. Rather than stop and listen to what they were saying and respond to it in depth, however, the book seemed to go on with Scorch outlining the history and significance of various museum objects, leaving me to wonder what would have happened had Scorch’s request to du Preez and Marzan been turned back on him: have a real, personal, critical, and reflexive conversation with the objects *and* the people you’ve worked with and allow us to be part of your process of becoming.

Though there were aspects of the book that could have been improved—as Tengan notes in the Afterward, the collaborative mode enacted ‘is not perfect’—it provides a model of what is possible when people come together to pay attention to the intersections, the conversations, and the spaces between themselves and museum objects through Oceanic lenses (189). In its attempt to highlight these lenses and what comes of utilizing them, I found a particular strength of the book residing in the voices of the co-authors. This is not to take away from Scorch’s work, but is to shine a light on what their contributions enabled. Kahanu’s ‘musings’ in Chapter 1, for instance, were necessary in allowing us to see the Bishop Museum as an evolving Hawaiian space and the difficult tensions and negotiations that a Kanaka Maoli working in that space must consider. Tonga and Mallon’s pieces in Chapter 5, similarly, were critical in allowing the reader to see Pacific peoples speaking back to the ways our stories have been told and represented all the while asking questions of themselves as people who work in museum spaces. While it is not as clear which specific portions Moreno Pakarati and Mulrooney wrote themselves, or collaborated with Scorch on in the section on Rapa Nui, I am confident that their work on the chapter enabled it to reach the depths it did. For instance, Chapter 3 of the book, where their work was interwoven with Scorch’s, made me rethink my own approach to archival and museum materials, particularly photographs, to see them not just as captured moments from the past but as ‘embodiments of memories, biographies, and genealogical relations’ in the present (72). Viewed in relation to Tengan’s overview of *maka* (a Hawaiian term with various definitions including ‘eye’, ‘point’, ‘bud’, and ‘beloved’) in the Afterward, I was reminded of the responsibility we all have to view what we encounter in ethnographic museums—and to extend this, what we encounter in Pacific spaces at large—through the lens of regeneration. The ‘things’ we face are always in the process of becoming just as we are in our interactions, conversations, and engagements with them. While there were parts of the book that I thought could have been more carefully considered, that does not take away from the contribution it makes to the ways we view ethnographic museums and the many *taonga* they hold.