Morphy, Howard. *Museums, Infinity and the Culture of Protocols: Ethnographic Collections and Source Communities*. New York: Routledge, 2020. ISBN 9781138565593. 134 p. $59.95.

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In *Museums, Infinity, and the Culture of Protocols: Ethnographic Collections and Source Communities*, Howard Morphy expands the idea of the “universal museum” into the “infinite museum.” Because museums have stakeholders who exist around the world and into the distant future, he argues, they are mandated to perpetually preserve collections and collections access. Morphy identifies repatriation and access protocols as threats to museum mandates and the rights of future stakeholders. In this review I will restrict myself to one of several potential discussions of this work: that Morphy’s account does not take the roles of Indigenous sovereignties seriously enough, thus undermining them as bases for heritage governance.

Morphy begins by reflecting on his life in museums, from his boyhood fascination with displays at the Pitt Rivers Museum to his professional roles there as a collector, curator, and anthropologist. Then, in the second and third chapters, he lays out an history of anthropological museum collecting to argue that ethnographic museums promote global appreciation for Indigenous cultures. This history, he believes, originated in colonial violence but shifted to anthropological contexts formed by Indigenous agency, partnership, and—increasingly—collaboration. In the fourth chapter, Morphy makes his case for preserving the remains of ancient Indigenous ancestors in museum collections for research. Here he outlines the implications of his “infinity perspective” for the definition and agency of stakeholder groups.¹ In the case of reburial for ancestors and their grave goods, “the wish of a particular group to destroy an object may be framed as a denial of the rights of future generations to have a say in the decision and to have access to the objects themselves.”² Morphy argues in his penultimate chapter for the importance of open access to museum collections. He sees open access as resolving the inequities of cultural gatekeeping and warns that movements toward repatriation and respecting sometimes restrictive protocols “result in the information

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¹. Howard Morphy, *Museums, Infinity and the Culture of Protocols: Ethnographic Collections and Source Communities* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 56.

². Morphy, *Museums, Infinity and the Culture of Protocols*, 56.
contained within museum collections being shut off.’’3 The book then concludes with thoughts on museum practices which promote collaboration with communities of origin, provided they do not compromise the continuity of museological and anthropological disciplines.

Although Morphy’s conclusions may be similar to those of the 2004 “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums” and anti-repatriation positions of the late 1900s, he does make a slight shift in the framing of these debates. Instead of asking “who owns the past?” he effectively asks “who owns the future of collections?” His answer is that diverse stakeholders across the globe and into the unimaginable future own collections, and that museums are thus responsible for stewarding them with maximal preservation and access. This liberal mandate is threatened, Morphy argues, by “the culture of protocols” and “the rhetoric of repatriation,” his monolithic catch-phrases for the arrays of Indigenous governance systems surrounding belongings and relations.

Morphy considers and dismisses a range of pertinent concerns raised by his anti-repatriation stance, such as interests in righting past wrongs (which he sees as anachronistic and naïve) and of access to one’s own heritage (which he sees as best served by museums).4 What goes unaddressed may be the most pertinent concern for Indigenous collections: Indigenous sovereignty. Never having ceded their sovereignty, Indigenous nations ought to have determination over their own heritages, through their own systems of governance.5 Discussions of “the culture of protocols” and “the rhetoric of repatriation” are as close as Morphy comes to addressing Indigenous sovereignty. However, by suggesting that these “rhetorics” and “protocols” are perpetuated by misled, misinformed, and presumably non-Indigenous activists and academics,6 rather than Indigenous cultural and political leaders and museum professionals—such as those who have initiated and led campaigns for NAGPRA, the Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples, UNDRIP, and countless repatriations—Morphy dismisses these sustained and explicit assertions of Indigenous sovereignty.

The idea of “the culture of protocols” represents Indigenous sovereignty as a regressive threat to the modern liberal democratic ideal of equal and universal access. I suggest that Morphy’s rejection of these protocols relates to what Lisa Lowe refers to as the “violence of inclusion,”7 whereby the colonial philosophy of liberalism is asserted

3. Morphy, *Museums, Infinity and the Culture of Protocols*, 78.
4. Morphy, *Museums, Infinity and the Culture of Protocols*, 63, 78.
5. Michael Asch, “Concluding Thoughts and Fundamental Questions,” in *Protection of First Nations Cultural Heritage: Laws, Policy, and Reform*, ed. Catherine Bell and Robert K. Paterson (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 394–411.
6. Morphy, *Museums, Infinity and the Culture of Protocols*, 6.
7. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 6.
as the universal basis of legitimate governance, and those who would not otherwise ascribe to it are forced under its sway with or without consent. Audra Simpson demonstrates how surveilling Indigenous sovereignty is designed to raise opposition to it while simultaneously reifying colonial sovereignty which operates without the same attention. Morphy’s framing of “the culture of protocols” functions in this way by anxiously scrutinizing Indigenous governance while normalizing colonial globalizing liberalism as the legitimate basis of sharing heritage.

The maintenance of colonialism is implicit in Morphy’s logistical argument against repatriation. He argues that many Indigenous communities lack the resources and institutional capacity to preserve their own material heritage. In a time when many Indigenous communities have established cultural centres and museums, the idea that Indigenous nations cannot care for Indigenous material culture should be abandoned. Beyond its inaccuracy, the argument that museums should care for Indigenous collections in perpetuity because they have better resources has the sinister implication that the extractive colonialism shoring up state- and corporate-sponsored museums and impoverishing Indigenous communities, can, will, and should continue into “infinity.” This is an expression of what Eve Tuck and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández term “settler futurity,” which “. . .seeks to recuperate and not interrupt settler colonialism, to. . .incorporate Indigenous peoples into the multicultural settler colonial nation state. . .”

Morphy recognizes that Indigenous interests in museum collections will exist into infinity, but he sees Indigenous self-determination of those materials as firmly in the past. Despite understanding that illegally-taken items must be returned, he asserts that such items form an insignificant minority of collections. Morphy asserts that the rest—assumed to have been agentively and consensually transferred to museums—can not legitimately leave. This free market definition of consent misconstrues political, economic, and cultural contexts of the past, and sovereign Indigenous agency in the present and future. Such a narrow view allows Morphy to use the moment of collection as the last possible point of refusal. Compare this to Stacey Loyer’s study of Haudenosaunee agency in collecting, which notes that items were sometimes sent by their owners to museums for particular reasons, such as sheltering during periods of cultural suppression. Where those items still have work to do in museums they

8. Audra Simpson, “Subjects of Sovereignty: Indigeneity, the Revenue Rule, and Juridics of Failed Consent,” Law and Contemporary Problems, 71, no. 3 (2008): 214–215.
9. Morphy, Museums, Infinity and the Culture of Protocols, 113.
10. Eve Tuck and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández, “Curriculum, Replacement, and Settler Futurity,” Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, 29, no. 1 (2013): 80.
11. Stacey Loyer, “Belonging and Belongings: Ethnographic Collecting and Indigenous Agency at the Six Nations of the Grand River” (PhD dissertation, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, 2013), 211–212, 220.
should presumably continue their residence there. However, when their work is complete or when museums prevent them from doing it, the terms of consent may no longer be met. Whatever the historical circumstances, the ongoing fact of Indigenous sovereignty, relationality, and agency mean that institutional acquisitions are never fully settled.

Together with other recent works such as Jenkins’ (2016) Keeping their Marbles: How the Treasures of the Past Ended Up in Museums . . . And Why They Should Stay There and Repatriation and Erasing the Past by Weiss and Springer (2020), Museums, Infinity and the Culture of Protocols appears to be part of a backlash against the last thirty years of Indigenous sovereignty struggles and successes in the heritage sector. It is disturbing that such a trend is being supported by an anthropologist of Morphy’s stature. However, the shortage of compelling new arguments in this backlash may reassure museum workers in continuing efforts toward respecting and upholding Indigenous sovereignty. It is comparatively intriguing to see bold advocacy for repatriation and grappling with the politics of time arise simultaneously and from the same institution—the Pitt Rivers Museum—in Hicks’ (2020) The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution. I advise that Morphy’s book be read in conversation with such theories of restitution and, more importantly, with Indigenous accounts of ongoing sovereignty struggles and ancestral relations.

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