

*We Are Coming Home: Repatriation and the Restoration of Blackfoot Cultural Confidence* by Gerald T. Conaty (ed.) 2015. AU Press: Edmonton, AB. 299pp. ISBN. 978-1-77199-017-2

Repatriation is a complex practice that involves the dedication and patience of both museum staff and community ceremonialists and members. However, histories of repatriation events are not often discussed, in part because of the lengthy process of each single repatriation; but also because repatriation often blurs the lines between the professional, personal, and communal. These are the issues that are best captured in Gerald Conaty's edited volume, *We are Coming Home: Repatriation and the Restoration of Blackfoot Cultural Confidence*. It is a unique example in the literature, as it is a single volume dedicated to repatriation cases that involve Blackfoot materials and sacred bundles. Read together, the chapters document an important aspect of the history of repatriation in Canada – a discussion that has long been dominated by conversations regarding American repatriation legislation.

With contributions by museum professionals and academics (Robert Janes, Gerald Conaty, John Ives) as well as Blackfoot ceremonialists and traditionalists represented by the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai Nations (Chris McHugh, Herman Yellow Old Woman, Allan Pard, Jerry Potts, and Frank Weasel Head), each chapter speaks to (and occasionally against) dominant repatriation narratives that focus on western bureaucratic negotiation. As a whole however, the volume adds new dimensions to repatriation discussions in academic texts. Each author contributes personal stories of the relationships that are made or rekindled in order to return museum objects back to their communities or rightful caretakers. Where some have argued that a greater discussion of the legal framework developed in Alberta is necessary, this volume also offers a welcome move away from seeing legislation as the most important part of repatriation work, and focuses on the interpersonal relationships and networks that are often built in order to facilitate the return of cultural heritage.

As other reviewers have observed, this volume contributes unique insight into the career of the late Gerald Conaty, whose work in museums and the academy in Canada is rightfully highlighted. However, as one reviewer also notes (Krmpotich, 2016); this makes it a difficult text to critique. One strength of this volume is the way in which each chapter tells a distinct story, and each authors voice stands strongly alone. The volume does not superimpose a grand narrative of Blackfoot repatriation, but instead allows each individual author to put forth their own personal histories and arguments about the processes they have experienced. This is a reflection of the fact that there are often a plethora of voices involved in repatriation work. These voices do not necessarily all agree, and this is an important part of collaboration and negotiation that is often elided once projects like these come to an end. Therefore, this volume stands, as Frank Weasel Head expressed in his chapter, as an important, albeit Westernized “paper” document of each individual’s repatriation experiences and thus illustrates the role of individuals in repatriation history (152).

Another important strength is the focus on the history of repatriation in a specifically

Canadian (and Albertan) context. Many chapters examine the history of repatriation in Canada broadly – and careful attention is paid throughout the book to the creation of the only existing Canadian legislation concerning the return of objects in Alberta: The First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act (known as FNSCORA). Conaty’s first chapter narrates this history well, although it lacks some connections to current and evolving literature in the field that may make it seem out of date to a contemporary audience. John Ives’ chapter gives a much-needed overview of the process from the view of the Royal Alberta Museum (RAM) as loan procedures were conducted and as FNSCORA was prepared. His chapter highlights the difficulties in establishing new laws in any governmental system, and would serve as a useful introduction to museum legal issues in Canada. Equally useful is Conaty’s chapter on the culture and history of the Blackfoot people; this gives an excellent amount of context on the history of the Blackfoot for those unfamiliar with Blackfoot territory and cultural history.

These contextual chapters are necessary to set the historical stage for the other chapters that document the lived experience of Blackfoot repatriation written by Alan Pard, Jerry Potts, Frank Weasel Head, Chris McHugh, and Herman Yellow Old Woman. These chapters raise important issues concerning the resurgence of cultural practices and the uneasy relationship between Euro-American legal frameworks and Blackfoot protocols and ways of being. This is highlighted by Jerry Potts when writing about the challenges of working with the provincial government where they would find themselves working within “the language of the Alberta government’s legal team to appease them” while also maintaining “the integrity of what we were representing” (145). This theme – of “appeasement” to Euro-American forms of government and ownership – will resonate with anyone who has conducted repatriation work. Indeed, these negotiations are not only difficult because they are personal and important; they are difficult because they are concerted attempts by groups of people to negotiate across and between knowledge systems.

As Potts and other authors correctly point out, often Indigenous peoples are put in the position of working within a way of being that has been forced upon them, one that is strategically and historically opposed to Indigenous ways of knowing. Because of the dominant political systems in North America – the Canadian and American Nation States – first peoples are often required to divide groups across borders. The Blackfoot therefore face unique challenges when it comes to repatriation requests, as Canadian groups cannot request back their material from American museums, for example. Many authors in this book cite the difficulties when working within these geopolitical boundaries and appealing to the American Blackfoot groups is often the only way to receive materials that are in American museums. John Ives accurately summarizes these challenges when he writes about the complexity of drafting repatriation legislation because there “existed a genuine tension between the public needs of legislation and the private world of Blackfoot ceremonial life” (234). This tension is not only about legislation, but about a more pervasive western societal standard that occludes Indigenous knowledges and history. When objects are returned, and where communities like the Blackfoot drive the process, issues like these are often encountered.

Several authors also focus on addressing claims that objects could potentially be replicated

or reproduced instead of returned. In many documented cases, the Blackfoot were encouraged or offered the option to borrow or replicate the objects instead of requesting for their return. Replicating bundles, as this volume shows, has been done in certain cases but is not necessarily beneficial for all Blackfoot groups or in all repatriation cases. Importantly, as Allan Pard notes, often a community may not have the art or materials necessary to recreate each bundle as well (132).

Where there are occasional lacks in current literatures, and often sweeping generalizations of other museum practices elsewhere in Canada and in Europe, there are indeed a wealth of experiences and memories recounted in this volume. More than a simple legal decision, repatriation is highlighted as an ethical and *logical* stance. Frank Weasel Head writes: “If you don’t understand something, why keep it?” (179). The authors articulate that the majority of knowledge about Blackfoot bundles still lies still with the Blackfoot themselves, and objects must be brought back to the ceremonial lives of these communities. It is the focus on these stories that make this volume succeed as important documentation concerning the history – and future – of repatriation in Canada.

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### Reference Note:

Krmpotich, Cara. 2016. Book Review: Gerald T. Conaty “We Are Coming Home: Repatriation and the Restoration of Blackfoot Cultural Confidence.” *Manitoba History Journal*, 81 (Summer): 32-33.