

DISCUSSION BOARD 5: The Intersections between Cultural Heritage and Community Perspectives

Jun 5, 2025 3:14PM

[Benjamin M. Parks](#)

Sometimes an archive isn't a library or a ledger; it's a skull. A labeled one. A looted one. That's what stuck with me most after reading Chapter 5 of *Confronting Colonial Objects*. Human remains, taken from places like Namibia, New Zealand, and Algeria, were boxed up and shipped to Europe, where they were just sorted, measured, and displayed like curiosities. Not ancestors. Not people. Just "data" for the colonial imagination (Stahn, 2023a).

What this chapter makes clear is that collecting wasn't passive. It was conquest in slow motion; systematic, institutionalized, and intellectualized. Even the dead were brought under imperial control. In the case of Chief Mkwawa's skull, the object was so central to colonial identity that it got written into the Treaty of Versailles. That's not just a theft—it's a story overwritten with someone else's pen (Stahn, 2023a).

Chapter 2 frames the logic behind all of this. Collecting wasn't just about owning objects; it was about staging the world. Museums were designed to assert knowledge and control, to render colonized cultures visible only through the lens of the collector. The more "authentic" the object, the more it proved the West's ability to dominate time and meaning. It froze Indigenous cultures in display cases while the empire marched on (Stahn, 2023b).

The video *The Brutal Legacy of Colonial Collecting* (Al Jazeera English, 2023) makes it plain: these aren't old debates. They're current fights. Institutions still hold the bones. Still refuse to let go. Still act like they're preserving something when really, they're gatekeeping stories that aren't theirs to tell. In contrast, Daunnette's short documentary from BYkids shows what happens when communities control their own narratives. She's not a relic. She's a 17-year-old Native girl saying "we are still here." It's not academic—it's lived (BYkids, 2018).

That, to me, is the point of community archives. They don't just store memory; they rewrite it in the community's own voice. That's power. Not because it's perfect or institutional, but because it's accountable. It resists the impulse to collect just to display. It restores meaning where museums tried to strip it.

This work matters because it flips the question. Not "what should be preserved?" but "who gets to decide?" If the archive becomes a crime scene, then maybe our job is to help the evidence speak—and make sure it goes home.

References

Al Jazeera English. (2023, May 24). *The brutal legacy of colonial collecting* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QdGxVXPCME>



[Links to an external site.](#)

BYkids. (2018, October 29). *A short documentary about the culture of Indigenous people* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrIO1ZXmBK0>



[Links to an external site.](#)

Stahn, C. (2023a). Collecting humanity: Commodification, trophy hunting, and bio-colonialism. In *Confronting colonial objects* (Chapter 5). Oxford University Press.

Stahn, C. (2023b). The power of possession: Curiosity, prestige, and world-making. In *Confronting colonial objects*(Chapter 2). Oxford University Press.