

Treasured Possessions: Indigenous Interventions into Cultural and Intellectual Property.* Haidy Geismar. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. 297 pp.

Reviewed by Ilana Gershon

Haidy Geismar productively uses comparison to add new insights to familiar questions about how Eurocentric laws and institutions travel globally and are transformed in the process. She turns to intellectual property and cultural heritage regimes, and asks how indigenous people in two countries, New Zealand and Vanuatu, grapple with the culturally unacceptable logics at the heart of these regimes. Both Maori and Vanuatans use settings devoted to preserving and circulating objects—museums and auction houses, for example—to transform intellectual property regimes in frameworks that can protect their interests without, at the same time, recreating “‘Western’ or ‘Euro-American’ generic property regimes” (21). In some ways, this is a familiar set of issues to anthropologists—how do people struggle with culturally inappropriate laws and institutions to turn these laws and institutions into something more acceptable? Yet in the contemporary moment, not all law is written by Westerners. Geismar analyzes intellectual property and cultural heritage at a time when indigenous concepts are being introduced into contemporary formations of these regimes through indigenous representation in UN committees, indigenous members of Parliament, and other law and policy producing institutions. Her main focus, however, is on the ways that these regimes are provincialized, a concept she borrows from Dipesh Chakrabarty to discuss how indigenous and (largely Euro-American) generic standardizing logics intermingle in mutually constitutive ways. She looks at how *taonga* (Maori treasures) become both Maori and neoliberal, how *kastom* stands for ni-Vanuatu forms of claiming expert knowledge and simultaneously incorporating international notions of cultural heritage. By juxtaposing two case studies deftly, Geismar uses comparison to attend to a much overlooked aspect of this dynamic, examining the cross-cultural similarities between Maori and Vanuatans that allow similar strategies for provincializing international laws and policies. That is to say, for Geismar, cultural Otherness does not lead only to the revelation of cultural difference, but also of cultural similarity with nuanced and novel results (15).

Geismar is truly imaginative in discovering sites where the generic imaginaries of intellectual and cultural property are transformed through encounters with indigenous ideas and practices. She turns to the Vanuatuan Pig Bank Project, international art auctions for Pacific art, as well as a perhaps failed New Zealand government venture to create a Maori artistic trademark, the *toi iho*. She also compares Te Papa, the New Zealand national museum, with the Vanuatu Kaljori Senta (VKS), the Vanuatu national museum and library complex. In turning to both Te Papa and VKS, she looks at two institutions that attempt to address the specific historical paradoxes of being indigenous through their institutional structures, displays, and engagement with local communities. “Te Papa is a model for the incorporation of indigenous value in not just display, but within the dynamic national identity forged by the museum. The VKS is a model for many institutions struggling to make themselves relevant to grassroots and rural communities and to activate cultural preservation as a form of economic and cultural development” (123).

* This editorially reviewed contribution was accepted for publication in *Museum Anthropology Review* on December 1, 2014. The work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

In each context, Maori and ni-Vanuatu are using analogies between putatively standardized and standardizing transnational forms and their own older cultural practices to form innovative constructs. As Geismar points out, analogies are transformative, in part because every analogy compares things that are both alike and unlike each other. In doing so, analogies allow what is similar to anchor the ways in which comparing the differences can produce change. To provide a concrete example from Geismar's ethnography, the New Zealand government proposed a trademark, the *toi iho*, that would indicate to consumers that an object had been made by a sanctioned Maori artist. Many Maori artists adopted this willingly, viewing the trademark as analogous to other strategies Maori have developed to indicate the complex historical relationships embedded in an object. Before long, the trademark began to signal to the Maori artistic community social relationships that extended far beyond what a brand typically signals. As Geismar explains, the trademark came to stand for "more than just a commodity relation but a social group and in turn a social contract to publicize the value and relations of entitlement and ownership" (91). While Maori users were able to transform the trademark to accommodate their own social requirements, the trademark also resisted this wholesale transformation. In order to apply the *toi iho*, one had to engage with "requirements of standardization and comparison" and thus the mark was more suitable for artists who made repeatable objects, such as greenstone or wood carvers (107). Artists who made distinctly unique objects found it far more difficult to use the mark to their advantage. After all, the mark was geared towards creating a generic Maori mark of identity. These artists were struggling to fashion their own distinctive reputation, of which being Maori was a part, but only a part. Geismar details many other such instances in which intellectual property functions as an analogy, a dynamic relationship in which indigenous actors change what the form means, while using the form simultaneously changes indigenous actors' practices.

Treasured Possessions is a thoughtful exploration of how generic forms—trademarks, auctions, currency, museums—travel and are transformed through their travel. I found the chapters on Vanuatu's Pig Bank project and on the Pacific art auctions especially engaging, largely because the ethnographic cases provided such a playful insight into how different people collude to bestow objects with value. This is a book which should appeal to scholars seeking to understand how people traverse multiple social orders in a contemporary moment in which all too often state-oriented, market-based, individualizing ways of being triumph. It also contains illuminating arguments for those interested in intellectual property, cultural property, and cultural heritage institutions of various ilk.

Ilana Gershon is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University. She is the author of numerous works, including No Family is an Island: Cultural Expertise among Samoans in Diaspora (Cornell University Press, 2012) and The Break-Up 2.0: Disconnecting Over New Media (Cornell University Press, 2010).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v9i1-2.13639>