

Heaney, Christopher. *Empires of the Dead. Inca Mummies and the Peruvian Ancestors of American Anthropology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 380 pp.

Despite its spooky title and uncanny content, *Empires of the Dead* is not a zombie movie or video game that one might be tempted to play on Museum Night. It is instead a heady (one is tempted to say skull-uplifting), politically engaged, but ultimately melancholic book about the itinerant and irrepressible afterlives of curated «Peruvian» human remains, and particularly about how those afterlives shaped anthropology and its museology in the United States.

As Heaney masterfully explains over the course of the book's three parts (in an earlier age, each of these parts would have been called books), those plundered remains have not only been «studied to death». From the Incas (and before) to the Smithsonian (and beyond), they have been deployed as «tools of empire». At the same time, Heaney argues, those remains have been protagonists of curing and collective reckoning.

As a long, uncanny, and twisting history of, at turns, ancestral care, grave-robbing, colonial ignorance, native knowledge, and museum displays, Heaney's necro-empire of a book cannot help but be, like one of the many forensic reports it reports, a «Frankenstein monster of a publication» (p. 183). It comes with the territory. Rising to the challenge, Heaney has built his monster well. Catholically composed of three books in one, the trinitarian structure of Heaney's necro-empire recites itself thrice, moving, in nine chapters, from Inca origins to the halls of US and Peruvian anthropology museums. The first part of the mummy trinity, «Opening, 1525-1795», unravels the proto-colonial and colonial history of the propitiated and plundered «Peruvian dead» in three chapters, named, respectively, «Curing Incas», «Embalming Incas», and «Mummifying Incas». The second part, called «Exporting, 1780-1893» exports its three chapters on «Trading Incas», «Mismeasuring Incas», and

«Mining Incas»; while the third part, called «Healing», carefully curates texts on «Trepanning Incas», «Decapitating Incas», and, somewhat out of step with the rest, a very short chapter, a faux epilogue really, named «The Three Burials of Julio Cesar Tello». That epilogue-like chapter is followed by the real «Epilogue», named «Afterlives: Museums of the American Inca».

In brief, the first part argues that the «Peruvian dead» were key protagonists or interlocutors of Inca and early Hispanic rule, and that as a result they were soon «studied to death» by colonial science, becoming ubiquitous objects of curiosity in collections around the globe, and lightning rods in a series of debates about «race» and civilization. The second part argues that «Peru was America's Egypt». That is, that US anthropology's «ancestors» are not German ethnologists but the Peruvian dead it plundered and collected and, perhaps more importantly, the Hispanic and Peruvian knowledge of the dead that came with the remains. That Peruvian knowledge of the dead has, Heaney notes, long resisted universalizing, Anglophone models of what «decolonizing the museum» must mean, in part because it has long promoted a «far older project of decolonizing global history using Andean ancestors» (p. 239). The third part is mostly about how the Harvard-trained Peruvian archaeologist and museum director, Julio C. Tello, sought to mend, mostly in a nativist and nationalist vein that continued early efforts of Peruvian cultural decolonization, the racist and neocolonial tendencies of US and European anthropology by using Andean ancestors as witnesses of civilization, at the high collateral cost of increasing the disinterment of the Peruvian dead.

Despite five centuries of empire-building on the backs of decapitated and displayed «Peruvian» or «Inca» mummies, Heaney concludes, in necro style, «there is no end to this story». The story of the dead is endless because their remains have «defied their collection by seeding care among the descendants, curators, and visitors who seek them» (p. 247). For Heaney, the remains are not lifeless objects but instead «bundles of actors and intentions who will either outlast the institutions that seek to contain them or, perhaps more radically, will continue their weathering and decay» (p. 242).

Given its subject matter, this mummy book might very well outlast those institutions as well if not, more radically, returning to the dust that has killed more than one mummy scholar.

MARK THURNER
FLACSO-Ecuador