

Restitution of Human Remains in Museum Practice: A Need for Collaboration with Communities

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, the discourse around museums and museum practice has surrounded repatriation and restitution. The presence of stolen and unprovenanced human remains within the collections of museums and institutions is part of this ongoing discourse. Here, I argue that restitution of human remains is necessary to the decolonization of museums and museum practice. Additionally, the restitution process requires continuous community engagement and collaboration.

Introduction

A pertinent problem within museums and institutions is the presence of stolen and unprovenanced human remains. Through the process of restitution, many museums and institutions have made moves towards establishing and building better relationships with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Despite this, there are still individuals within academia who do not see the necessity for the restitution of these human remains, or the repatriation of other materials. In this paper, I argue that restitution of human remains is necessary to the decolonization of museums and institutions, and requires community engagement and collaboration throughout the entire process. To support this argument, I will first provide background information on restitution and repatriation. I will then discuss the relationship between human remains and scientific research, specifically looking at the reasons against restitution from the perspective of researchers and institutions. I will then explore instances where scientific research was necessary as a means to facilitate and aid restitution of human remains by drawing on examples within museum practice and community engagement. Finally, I will question the pursuit of scientific knowledge within the context of restitution and repatriation.

Background

The Oxford English Dictionary defines restitution as returning something to its proper and/or original owner (“restitution, n.” 2022), and repatriation as returning a person, money, or artifact to the country of origin (“repatriation, n.” 2022). These definitions all centre around the returning of something to its original owners, whether that be a country or a cultural group.

Restitution and repatriation are prevalent issues that Western institutions are facing today — specifically, as political subjects caught between the political relationships of countries (Tythacott and Arvanitis 2). Many view the process of restitution as a “transformative work for

all who are involved” (Atalay et al. 88) that transcends the binary lens often portrayed in academic discourse. Restitution occupies a contested space where binaries such as “Indigenous versus Western, “sacred versus secular”, “science versus religion”, or “colonial control versus cultural survival” oppose each other (Peers, Reinius and Shannon 1). These binary portrayals and understandings neglect the nuances and complexities surrounding restitution practices within museums and how they affect source communities.

As Belcastro and Mariotti write, restitution as a concept arose from a post-colonial and post-modern theoretical framework that was present in archaeology and anthropology during the 1960s and 1970s (230). In the 1980s and 1990s, legislation surrounding the right for Indigenous peoples to control the narratives of their heritage and cultural identities was put into practice by ‘post-colonial countries’ such as the United States, Canada, and Australia (230). Within this ‘post-colonial’ context, the process of restitution and repatriation is often perceived “as a means of reconciliation with previously oppressed and discriminated groups, and a strategy in which the communities of origin regain the right to define themselves, their history and identity” (Belcastro and Mariotti 230). In other words, ‘post-colonial’ countries and institutions consider the returning of stolen materials to their original homes as a means to apologize and reconcile with communities they have historically oppressed and discriminated against. However, restitution and repatriation has allowed for Indigenous communities to control the narrative of their histories and identities within these ‘post-colonial’ institutions.

The Argument Against Restitution: The Pursuit of Scientific Knowledge

Despite the tumultuous history of restitution and repatriation, there are still academics who believe that restitution and repatriation greatly limits scientific research opportunities, and therefore should not be encouraged. This type of attitude is especially prevalent in archaeology and anthropology (Krmpotich 145). Strictly speaking, a wealth of knowledge can be gained from archaeological human remains. Some examples of the knowledge obtainable from these remains include broadening our understanding of biological and cultural evolution, diets, diseases, ancestry, mobility, population demography, and changes in cultural beliefs and practices of past peoples (Belcastro and Mariotti 229; Stumpe 137).

Recognizing the potential benefits of scientific research on archaeological human remains can coexist with the understanding that the most meaningful research would only be possible through partnerships and collaborations between institutions, researchers, and communities (Stumpe 2005). However, there is still significant pushback from certain groups within academia due to the fear of a loss in scientific research opportunities. This, in turn, brings up questions surrounding the purpose of pursuing scientific knowledge and whether or not this knowledge can exist within a vacuum outside of its political and ethical context.

For some individuals, there is a perception that “academic study is under threat” due to the freedoms of scholarly pursuits being “gradually replaced by a repatriation agenda” (Anarui 23-24). This perspective of the ‘repatriation agenda’ is one that is viewed through a binary lens,

losing all nuance. By neglecting to see the bigger picture and the benefits and drawbacks of restitution and repatriation for all participants – institutions and source communities – it only serves to diminish the ethical and political nature of these processes. As Krmpotich describes, “[r]epatriation is not an obstacle to knowledge”, but a process that is able to “articulate people’s values of death and life” through its “oratory and material culture” (158). These processes become “potent symbols of identity, continuity and adaptability” of marginalized communities (Krmpotich 158).

There are a multitude of reasons why restitution of human remains is necessary and does not hinder scientific research opportunities. First of all, despite the cultural differences when perceiving and dealing with human remains, what stays the same across all cultures is that human remains are “not neutral and never ignored” (Belcastro and Mariotti 229). There will always be ethical problems and questions surrounding the study of these materials. These questions include asking if it is necessary to study these human remains, and if studied, who do they benefit and how? Is it benefitting the researcher or the descendent/source communities? Furthermore, arguments surrounding the constant pursuit of scientific knowledge will also be asked. For example, questions such as: what is the purpose of the pursuit of scientific knowledge? And how does this knowledge fit into the wider academic rhetoric? The pursuit of scientific knowledge at the expense of Indigenous communities has been perceived by many Indigenous peoples as a form of “‘exploitation’ of their past by archaeologists and anthropologists” and is understood as “a second wave of colonialism, in which science has been viewed as just another vehicle of oppression” (Belcastro and Mariotti 230).

Restitution: Collaboration Between Researchers and Communities

In some cases, restitution cannot occur without the explicit confirmation that those remains belong to a certain community. An example would be the famous case of the Kennewick Man, which brought the discussion of using biomolecular archaeological techniques, such as ancient DNA (aDNA) analysis, to the forefront of the conversation in the late 90s to early 2000s (Belastro and Mariotti 232). This discussion around the use of biomolecular archaeological techniques and methods persists today between researchers and source communities.

The Kennewick Man is a male skeleton that was discovered in Kennewick, Washington, U.S.A in 1996 (Rasmussen et al. 455). Through bioanthropological analyses, such as morphometrics, the remains were determined to not be of Native American descent (specifically, “those of Northwestern U.S. Anthroposcopy” (Chatters 305). Therefore, the remains did not need to be dealt with in compliance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in their restitution (Rasmussen et al. 455). Given this outcome, additional scientific studies on the remains were allowed (Rasmussen et al. 455). In order to aid the restitution of the Kennewick Man to its proper place, there was a need to determine the ancestry and affiliations of the Kennewick Man. Through biomolecular archaeological methods such as aDNA analysis, Kennewick Man’s genome was compared against worldwide genomic data, which demonstrated

that it was consistent with the genomes of Native North Americans (Rasmussen et al. 455). The outcome of this study supported the claims that the Indigenous communities (the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation + Umatilla) within the Kennewick area have been making since the discovery of the Kennewick Man.

The goal of aDNA techniques in relation to restitution is to be able to “reliably repatriate ancient unprovenanced remains to the correct Place and Country” (Wright et al. 6). However, despite the good intentions of researchers and institutions to aid in the restitution process, there are many conflicting views towards the use of biomolecular archeological methods to attribute remains to a specific group. As seen in Stumpe’s article on the restitution of Māori remains, there were “a variety of Māori views on the subject” (132), with some finding it entirely inappropriate. This example highlights the nuances and complexities of the restitution process. Not only is it crucial for institutions and researchers to create a dialogue with communities, but it is also absolutely necessary to ensure the proper restitution of remains. Institutions and researchers are not neutral agents within this conversation. The intention for mutual benefits to arise from working together (Anarui 24) when it comes to communication, collaborating, and understanding each other before, during, and after the restitution process is one that should be explored more frequently.

Restitution: Museum Practice and Community Engagement

The belief that museums can take a neutral position is one that is entirely false. As Tythacott and Arvanitis write, “[m]useums are, and have always been, political instruments” (2). The claims of the British Museum to have a neutral stance on restitution (Harris 143), is one that does not make any sense. To take a neutral stance on restitution and repatriation is to actually admit that the institution is against the act itself. As mentioned, museums and researchers can never be neutral parties when it comes to the conversation surrounding repatriation and restitution. In both cases, these agents are historically participating in unethical, or borderline unethical practices by making decisions and conducting scientific research without the permission of source communities. There needs to be reflection from these institutions in who this benefits the most by re-evaluating the power imbalances that are present within these relationships between institutions, researchers, and source communities. As Curtis discusses, restitution should be done on the terms of both the source communities and the institutions (2006).

As museums continue to decolonize their practices, the power relations between institutions and source communities have shifted (Tythacott and Arvanitis 5). They have gone from institutions “representing indigenous communities to [one of] dialogue, listening and the incorporation of voices” within museum spaces (Tythacott and Arvanitis 5). Through restitution and repatriation, museums and institutions reflect the continuous efforts in decolonization (Aranui 22).

Restitution is “not just about regaining ownership of [Indigenous communities’] ancestors but is about making people whole again through the receiving of remains that were taken against their ancestors’ wills” (Harris 139). This process is one that is powerful and transformative, thus, affecting each source community differently. For the Haida, the process of restitution and repatriation involves demonstrating yahgudangang, which is understood as respect (Krpmotich 147). This is done during the “emotional and physical journey to repatriate their ancestors’ remains” (Krpmotich 146). This respect is “expressed through adherence to cultural protocol involving actions and objects, property and ownership, and lineage and moiety relationships” (Krpmotich 146). Restitution and repatriation are seen as a form of mortuary practice for the Haida. These practices are “built upon cultural systems and protocol already in place” (Krpmotich 146). For the Māori, restitution has always been part of their culture and is not a new concept or process (Aranui 21). Moreover, through restitution and repatriation, it “reconnects the living and the dead with the whenua (land)” (Aranui 2020, 21). This demonstrates the importance, value, and significance of restitution of their ancestors in Western institutions for descendent/source communities.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper argued that restitution of human remains is necessary and requires community engagement and collaboration. This paper discussed how museums, institutions, and researchers are not apolitical agents in the restitution narrative. These agents must evaluate their positions when embarking on the restitution process, or on new scientific research endeavours. Only through understanding, communication, collaboration, and partnership can meaningful restitution and research be conducted between institutions, researchers, and descendent/source communities. At the end of the day, the pursuit of scientific knowledge is not more important than human decency and respectful attitudes towards the dead of other communities.

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