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Traveling Bones: Understanding the Process of Repatriation

Nordic Geographers Meeting 2017 Stockholm

In 1986 the Royal College of Surgeons of England received the first request for the return of Indigenous human remains (REF) yet it was not until December 2001 they finally agreed to return all human remains of Tasmanian Aboriginal origin held in the College collections to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community, which was followed by the repatriation of Indigenous ancestral remains to Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii.



Figure 1:

In the fifteen years between the first request and the agreement to return the Tasmanian remains there was an ongoing debate in the UK museum sector around if remains should be returned to Indigenous communities (REF). The repatriation debate often polarised those taking part as either pro or anti repatriation with the remains themselves becoming framed

as object or ancestor, person or thing (REF). Yet since UK museums have started to return remains, the focus has been on the symbolism of those remains, and despite the repatriation of human remains often being characterised as the 'journey home' (REF), little attention has been paid to the mobilities of the remains themselves, and the meanings created by their physical presence as they move through different spaces. However, repatriation researchers such as Cressida Fforde have traced the journeys of human remains on their way into museum collections, mapping the spaces through which the remains moved and revealing their role within complex social networks (REFS). Therefore, by applying the same approach to repatriated remains, my aim has been to explore in depth the meanings and issues created by, and linked to, the RCS repatriations.

What perhaps needs to be made clear at this point is that in attending to the material nature of human remains, I am not positioning them as objects. By considering human body parts as being consistently constituted and negotiated my aim is to explore the issues that arise at the intersection of these different meanings without getting drawn back into the ontological debate of object or ancestor. In bringing together this understanding with a consideration of affect, the question that has underpinned my approach to repatriation is not what is *done* with the remains, but what the remains *do* to people.

One of the key debates that I was interested in exploring through following the journey of the remains repatriated by RCS, was the idea that return of ancestral remains can heal the wounds of history. Anthropologist Russell Thornton (REF) uses the term the 'trauma of history' to describe events in the history of people which cause a trauma to that group much in the way that events in the lives of individuals may cause trauma to them.

Until this wrong is redressed, there will be no closure in respect of past injustices and an arguable enduring violation of fundamental human rights. The physical and psychological health, and indeed the social advancement, of indigenous communities are in consequence impaired

This language of trauma and group pain can be found in a number of statements on repatriation (REF). In response to this, repatriation, and particularly the cultural revival that the process can stimulate, has been framed as healing. However, in her review of repatriation within a UK context, sociologist Tiffany Jenkins (REF) argued although this was an important factor in making successful repatriation claims, there is little evidence to support it. In Jenkins view, rather than being healing, repatriation is a distraction from the political and material solutions communities suffering from poverty and declining health really need.

When first planning my research into the RCS repatriations, I presumed that the majority of the ancestral remains returned would have been returned to communities and the spaces I would be engaging with would be burial sites and cemeteries. However, in speaking to those involved with the repatriations it soon became apparent the reality was more complex

Sets of Remains (individual accession numbers)	Destination (listed in RCS Records)	Location in September 2015
Tasmanian Repatriations (2002 (exit no. 82) and 2009 (exit no. 208))		
8	Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre	Returned to Tasmania by TAC
Mainland Australia Repatriation (2003 (exit no. 81-92))		
5	North West Nations Clans, Victoria	Melbourne Museum (Not in database)
10	Yorta Yorta People, Victoria	Returned to Yorta Yorta Nation
5	Victoria	Returned to Community
2	Victoria	National Museum Australia, Canberra
5	South Australia	Returned to Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority
10	South Australia	National Museum Australia, Canberra
2	South Australia	South Australian Museum, Adelaide
4	Northern Territory	National Museum Australia, Canberra
1	Australian Museum, Sydney	Australian Museum, Sydney
11	National Museum Australia, Canberra	National Museum Australia, Canberra
Dental Casts	National Museum Australia, Canberra	National Museum Australia, Canberra
New Zealand Repatriation (2007 (exit no. 73))		
1	Te Papa Tongarewa	Returned to Ngati Te Ata for burial
2	Te Papa Tongarewa	Te Papa to be returned to Chatham Islands late 2015
17	Te Papa Tongarewa	Te Papa Tongarewa
Hawaii Repatriation (2011 (exit no. 259))		
1	Hui Malama Na Kupuna o Hawaii Nei	Returned to community for burial

Table 1: Repatriations from the Royal College of Surgeons of England

What Table 1 shows is that as of 2015, many of the remains returned by RCS to mainland Australia and New Zealand are now stored in museums. One of the key reasons for this became evident on my first visit to the ancestral remains store at National Museum Australia. The Manager of the Repatriation Unit explained that this was partly due to the complex and time-consuming research that was often required to establish provenance, but also the time it could take communities to be ready to receive remains, which in some cases could be a number of years (Interview REF). This has resulted in the creation of distinct spaces in which the ancestral remains are stored while communities work through the complex issues that need to be resolved prior to reburial.

In his exploration of segregation in South African cemeteries, A.J. Christopher (REF) highlights how the political desires of the dominant community can be expressed within deathscapes. Applying this spatial lens to museums, initially reveals a similar picture with the very presence of the Indigenous ancestral remains within museums being indicative of imposition of the will of the dominant community. However, the creation of ancestral remains stores, linked to the practice of repatriation, has created new local geographies that foreground the meaning of the remains as a site for identity and remembrance.

It should also be noted that 'community' and 'museum' are not mutually exclusive. In speaking with Indigenous museum staff in Australia and New Zealand, they did not seem to separate their identities as Indigenous people and as museum professionals. In fact the two identity positions appear to inform each other with the result being that respectful treatment of ancestral remains within museum spaces is connected to not only collections care, but also to culturally related performance. Other notable examples are smoking ceremonies to cleanse the space, provision for ritual washing and communing with the ancestral remains.



...there are things we do before we go into the wāhi tapu where all the remains are kept. We do karakia, or prayers...and we might sing a song to them, something old that they would recognise perhaps. Then at the end we do a karakia and we will always wash our hands, or pour water over us as a cleansing.

Interview with Amber Aranui, Te Papa Tongarewa

What can be seen through these cultural practices becoming accepted, and even expected, is a respect for the views of the living but also an acknowledgement of the human remains or ancestral remains store as an emotional affective and particular type of cultural space. Within these museums, repatriation is not a briefly symbolic event but ongoing commitment and what we see in practice is that repatriation has brought a particular type of deathscape into being in the form of the ancestral remains store.

Yet this still leaves the question as to why ancestral remains have not been reburied. To explore this question I will draw on the example of the ancestral remains, the Old People, returned by RCS to the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority in South Australia. Although no longer held in a museum, many of the remains returned are stored at the Ngarrindjeri Cultural Centre, Camp Coorong in South Australia. One of the key reasons that emerged for this was the issues around finding burial space.

The Coorong is a highly agricultural region with many private holdings so as well as not having the available land to rebury repatriated remains, new uses of the landscape continue to threaten Ngarrindjeri burials. Ancestral remains are uncovered every few weeks, a constant reminder that the Ngarrindjeri are still unable to project the burial sites of their Old People creating a constant stress for the cultural heritage team and Elders (Interview REF). Previous reburials have involved complex negotiations with local and state government agencies which has led to the argument that funding needs to be made available to support the research, meetings, administration, management of reburial sites, community training and the settling community disputes that arise as part of the repatriation process. For the Ngarrindjeri, repatriation is a long-term process that has the potential to be healing, but can also be damaging, both emotionally and financially (REF).



At another site we visited, Luke [Trevorrow] talked about the work of the heritage team who are called out when remains are exposed or uncovered, so they can be removed and reburied as soon as possible. He pointed out the sand dunes on the opposite site of the Coorong and said that the burials there are under threat from the off road vehicles that have been using the area so the heritage team are taking steps to remove or protect them.

Extract from research diary, July 2015

It was also explained to me that a repatriation is like a funeral and, as can often be the case with funerals, there will be politics and family rivalry and following a Ngarrindjeri community meeting in 2015, a forthcoming reburial was called off, as there was not enough agreement. For Ngarrindjeri Elder Major Sumner, this is an example of how repatriation feeds into other tensions within the community. These tensions are not about *if* ancestral remains should be returned, but *how*, by *whom* and to *where* (interview REF). This is an important point, as in framing repatriation as a political exercise, one in which the remains are viewed as political symbols, what can get lost is an understanding of repatriation as an obligation and as a burden. For example the remains that are stored at Camp Coorong are physical reminder of a painful history, the loss of land, the loss of culture and an ongoing lack of power to project ancestral burials.

Being on the missions meant that we lost much of our culture. The return of the old people brings up of that history and means engaging with our traditional culture, and some people are afraid.

Interview with Major Sumner, Ngarrindjeri Elder

For the Ngarrindjeri the return of ancestral remains requires an engagement with difficult past and traditional culture, which for some is a painful and frightening process.

The narrative of reconciliation within which national repatriation programmes operate, places the therapeutic values of the process at the centre. In this iteration repatriated remains have the agency to heal the 'trauma of history. However, by being alive to the materialities of the remains themselves, what emerges is a more complex picture in which the remains have agency to be confronting, unsettling and the focus of community tensions. What it is important to make clear here, is that in exposing this agency my aim is not to undermine Indigenous people's claims for the return of their ancestral remains, or suggest the process should be considered as harmful. Rather, I argue for a reframing of repatriation as part of a wider process of decolonisation.

The framing of repatriation as part of the decolonising process allows space for communities to discuss, debate and disagree on how to proceed and this approach to the reburials reflects the idea of repatriation being part of a wider programme, all the strands of which are about the ability to identify, organise and act as a nation. By positioning repatriation as part of enacting nationhood, the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority are linking it to work in cultural heritage, health, education and natural resources that aim to restore healthy flows and allow Ngarrindjeri to be healthy (REF). A principle summed by Aunty Ellen Trevorrows weaving analogy;

Weaving is a tradition that we have re-established and adding it to the reburial ceremony is an important aspect because it makes connections and linkages into the past and our cultural practice. Stich by stich, circle by circle, weaving is like the creation of life, all things are connected.

Ellen Trevorrow, Ngarrindjeri Elder,
June 2015

Through following the journey that the remains returned by RCS have taken, what has emerged are the complexities of the repatriation process and that in focusing on the global movement of the remains there has been a lack of attention paid to the local geographies created by the need to store remains once they are returned and the cultural, spiritual and financial burden the return of ancestral remains can place on communities. Therefore repatriation cannot be understood purely through the lens of political symbolism, or as the undoing of a colonial practice that is healing and therapeutic as this risks side-lining the competing, conflicting and often confronting meanings that the remains can hold.

In shifting from considering what is done *to* the remains, to what the remains do *to* people, it would appear that although the repatriation of human remains can be therapeutic, this is not a process that occurs, or that can be understood in isolation and there is therefore a need for museums and government departments to develop a more nuanced understanding if we are to move towards a more just approach to repatriation practice.

