



School: School of Humanities

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Project Title: Repatriating Human Remains: Changing Museum Practice

UOA: 28 - History

Research Statement

The repatriation of the human remains of Indigenous peoples removed within a colonial context has been the subject of debate within UK museums over the last 30 years, with the main focus being the arguments for and against repatriation. Many museums have now returned human remains to their countries of origin, yet, despite the documentation of 'the journey home' and of the initial impacts of repatriation, there has been little research on the longer-term impacts of the process.

The Legacies of Repatriation project provides the first study of the histories and legacies of repatriation in the nationally and internationally significant collection of the Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCS). Taking a more-than-representational approach and engaging with the materiality, mobility and agency of the repatriated remains and the documentation that relates to them, this study bridges the gap between research considering the approach of museums to repatriation, and ethnographic studies on the meanings of the return of ancestral remains to individual communities.

Using the repatriations from RCS to Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii as case studies, the research makes explicit the impact that Indigenous repatriation claims have had on wider UK museum practice through opening up new ways of theorising and discussing repatriation and understanding the process. Through a series of in-depth interviews carried out with museum professionals and representatives from Indigenous communities, the research also highlights the complexities encountered once ancestral remains have been returned to their country of origin and how the repatriation process intersects with issues of Indigenous land rights, health, sovereignty and politics at local, national and state levels.

Given the ongoing debates around the display of human remains and the colonial legacy of ancestral remains and material culture held in European museums, the aim of this final project report is to provide a better understanding of the legacies of the repatriation process for the different stakeholders involved in order to inform policy, practice and public understanding. It has therefore been disseminated to all the organisations and communities involved in the research and made publicly available via the Museum Ethnographers Group Online Repatriation Resource.