Healing through Heritage?

The Repatriation of Human Remains from European Collections as Potential Sites of Reconciliation

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ABSTRACT

This Forum contribution builds on the ethnographic engagement with restitution projects as places of transcultural encounter. Based on data collected in 2019 during repatriation ceremonies in Berlin and Leipzig, I show how a responsibility for human remains that was shared between European museums and Australian Indigenous custodians set in motion processes of healing, both among Indigenous groups and those working with these collections in Europe. I further argue that ethnographic museums change in these processes from supposedly passive exhibition spaces to spaces of socio-critical engagement. Finally, I explore the decolonial potential of such collaborative engagements with heritage within and beyond European borders that are motivated by provenance research and repatriation practices.

KEYWORDS

decolonialisation, healing, heritage, museums, restitution, transculturality, Australia, Germany

This contribution explores the potential of restitution projects as places of transcultural encounter and healing. It draws on ethnographic material recorded during repatriation ceremonies for human remains that were handed back by German ethnographic museums and collections and other institutions to Indigenous communities in Australia. The hypothesis put forward is that initiatives that share a responsibility for human remains and cultural objects between former colonisers and colonised allow access to a ‘third space’ from which the status of ethnographic collections and their associated duty of care can be rethought (cf. Bhabha 1994). I argue that proper engagement with the diasporic condition of human remains opens up new cross-cultural constellations through which to transform museums into productive spaces of co-constitutive heritage futures, ‘rethink[ing] the status, value, and potential of ethnographic collections in the world’s museums for different stakeholders’ (Basu 2011: 28).

My argument is closely linked to the diverse hopes that these repatriations raise among those involved – museums, government institutions, and the Indigenous communities that these ancestral remains are returned to. I draw on data collected in 2019 during repatriation ceremonies in Berlin and Leipzig. These were conducted in an alleged spirit of ‘shared stewardship’, as Léontine Meijer-van Mensch (Director of the State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony, Germany) termed it during a public debate in the wake of the repatriation ceremony at the GRASSI Museum in Leipzig.

It is beyond the scope of this contribution to assess whether care and concern for human remains and cultural objects can ever be ‘shared’ on equitable terms between such different stakeholders. Meanwhile, the text shows how the mere acknowledgement of care and concern set in motion processes of healing, both among Indigenous groups and those working with these collections in Europe. What I argue is that the shared *approach* advocated for (all be it mainly by the Western museum authorities alone) allowed for heritage to develop a transformative potential in two ways: (1) The ethnographic museum transformed from supposedly passive exhibition space to become a space of socio-critical engagement. (2) The Indigenous custodians, and not the representatives of Western institutions, were to conduct the repatriation ceremony in ways they felt appropriate, which meant an empowering gesture towards rebuilding traditions that were deemed destroyed in the colonial encounter.

Along these lines, the ethnographic evidence shows how heritage operates through a multitude of discourses within and beyond national boundaries and in doing so opens up a ‘third-space’ from where the power-asymmetries that were established since the colonial encounter can be rethought. In this way, heritage becomes a holistic and interdisciplinary field that demands pro-active approaches to its contested legacies, highlighting human resilience and community engagement in collaborative initiatives that advance the decolonial project.

The acquisition of heritage objects is often traced back to processes of exchange, sale or targeted production (Campfens 2018). Their ‘object diaspora’ thus entails various dimensions of migration, ‘of form, function, and ownership, as well as of location’ (Basu 2011: 36). Such ‘migrations’ are closely connected to the systematic cultural and material expropriation, physical exploitation and relocation of colonially oppressed peoples (Hall 1994; Nic Craith 2008). The full extent of the latter becomes particularly pertinent in the context of human remains. The displacement of Indigenous Australians from their lands by European settlers in the nineteenth century initiated an extensive plunder

of human remains that were brought to Europe to be studied and displayed. Churches, museums and university collections benefited from this colonial system (Turnbull 2017). Historical and ethnographic analysis of their acquisition processes sheds light on both the heritage of presumable ‘others’ that was researched, archived and museumised, and the acquisition contexts that speak to the political and social conditions of the time (CARMAH 2018; Sarr and Savoy 2018).

Contemporary restitution and repatriation projects set in motion profound changes in museums, including the use of new technologies, and are widely discussed in and beyond academic contexts (Boasblogs.org). Paul Basu (2011: 36) points to the fact that object diasporas might lead a life as museum object while they also remember other social places and contexts. This is equally true for human remains held in European collections. A restitution project like the one described below thus critically expands the context in which not only museum collections but also colonial relations can be discussed, evaluated and negotiated (Trouillot 1995). This offers the possibility to decolonise museums and to deconstruct classification systems, many of which continue to undermine the contributions of marginalised groups to global heritage preservation initiatives (Daugbjerg and Fibiger 2011; Meskell 2013).

They Came to Bring Them Home: An Ethnographic Moment in Berlin *Buru*

China City, a restaurant on Leipziger Straße in Berlin, was very much appreciated by the Yawuru and Karajarri delegation from Broome (Western Australia) who had come to the Australian Embassy in Germany to retrieve their ancestral remains. The latter had arrived between 1880 and 1902 as an alleged purchase or donation to the Royal Zoological and Anthropological Ethnographic Museum, predecessor of today’s Museum of Ethnology in Dresden, Saxony (Nietfeld 2019). China City became a preferred restaurant for the evenings before and after the repatriation ceremony. We shared plates of fish, duck, chicken, mushrooms, vegetables, noodles and rice. I learnt about family relations and who was related to whom and how within the wider Broome community. The atmosphere reminded me of visits to *Tongs*, a famous Chinese restaurant in Broome that is closely tied to the city’s multicultural population of European, Asian and Aboriginal descent.

During these cold days in Berlin, the dishes served at China City thus resembled familiar comfort foods known from the ‘Kriol Kitchen’

at home (Pranaitytė 2020). The evenings at the round restaurant table were therefore nourishing in multiple ways. The group regained both the physical and spiritual strength necessary to adapt and transform diverse places into *buru* in order to let their ancestors know that they had now come to bring them home. Indigenous people of the West Kimberley use the term *buru* to describe both land and time. When you are in your *buru*, it is not relevant from where you came and to where you will be going. Your attention is with the place and in the moment. These transformations of place were striking for many who participated in the repatriation ceremony in Berlin.

On the Australian side, the ceremony was sponsored and overseen by diverse government bodies and officials, including the Australian ambassador Lynette Wood. As outlined below, a delegation of Yawuru and Karajarri Indigenous community representatives played an equally important role. On the German side, responsibility mostly lay with members of the State Art Collection of Saxony, supported by the state's Minister for Education and Research Eva-Maria Stange. The audience included around sixty people who were related to repatriations in various ways: curators in museums and collections, the organizing bureaucracy and administration, German and Australian scholars and provenance researchers.

The event lasted for nearly three hours. However, as I stood with colleagues and guests afterwards, none of them – nor any of the high-ranking officials present – were in a hurry to leave. This made a difference to previous repatriations from Germany to Australia, notably those of 2013 and 2014 from the anatomic collections of Berlin's Charité, one of the largest university hospitals in Europe. Between 2010 and 2013, the 'Charité Human Remains Project' was set up to conduct interdisciplinary provenance research on skeletal remains in anthropological collections and to organise several restitutions of human remains to Indigenous communities. The project was led by anatomist Andreas Winkelmann and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG, project number 175718165).

While these repatriations took place in a rather pragmatic manner (Winkelmann 2020), the Yawuru and Karajarri delegation's presence turned the 2019 handover ceremony into a multisensory experience, paving the way for the ancestors to return home. The encounter made those present aware of the pain that had been inflicted on them, realizing that the very motivations for this wrong-doing had foreclosed any proper transcultural engagement. In other words, as Western science and museum staff 'handed over' the ceremony to the Indigenous

elders, observers got a glimpse of the wisdom and beauty of the culture that colonial Europe had stolen. Both non-Indigenous and indigenous participants later noted in personal discussion that this ceremonial act was part of a much wider healing process but which, nonetheless, the restitution project had contributed to in some way.

The day of the repatriation ceremony was bright and cold. ‘There you are’, said Sarah Yu when I greeted her in the hotel lobby. She was another member of the delegation and instrumental in setting up contacts with the German institutions. ‘We have to get some wood’, she continued and went into the elevator to put on different clothes. I went to the front desk and asked for a bag. Though I already wore my suit and tie, I was determined to help since there would be no smoking ceremony without fire.

We collected sufficient dry branches from under the hatches behind the hotel and brought them to Neil McKenzie, Yawuru law boss and head of the delegation. He had already installed the fireplace in the glass atrium of the embassy and was now in conversation with the facility manager about security procedures, the sensitivity of the flooring and the fire alarm.

Figure 1: Eucalyptus leaves and fireplace at the Australian Embassy, Berlin, 2019. Photo by Carsten Wergin.

Then the boxes with the ancestral remains arrived with the words *Nagula jarntu* (Saltwater Woman), *Nagula wamba* (Saltwater Man), or *Nagula wuba* (Saltwater Child) written on them, depending on whose remains they held.

The delegation collected the remains of seven of their ancestors from the State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony. A total of forty-one Aboriginal Australians were returned that day, which made it the largest handover of Indigenous remains taken from Australia during the colonial era to date. The story of an Indigenous girl stood out. She had been enslaved by Broome pearlers in the late nineteenth century and misused for the hard labour of collecting mother-of-pearl from the ocean floor, before her remains were sold to the European museum (Miller 2019). Forensic examinations of the remains showed significant injuries related to deep-water diving such as otitis, as well as changes to bone structures that provide evidence of the violence that people encountered and led to, ‘unnatural and premature deaths’ (Skyring and Yu 2019: 24).

At the beginning of the ceremony, embassy staff and guests bowed over the fire that Neil McKenzie had lit to clean themselves with its smoke. Each one closed their eyes to fan smoke over their faces and arms, before being handed a eucalyptus leaf by Dianne Appleby, another Indigenous representative. Together with the smoke, the smell of the leaves that everyone rubbed in their hands added a further sensual layer to the transformation of the place. Attendees were then asked to lay their hands on each of the boxes to part from the ancestors in a personal moment of silence. Many later confirmed how they appreciated this involvement in the ceremony.

As one of the first speakers, David Puertollano from Yawuru PBC, the representative organisation of the native title-holders for the area of Broome, proclaimed his people would, ‘forever remember the humanity you have shown’. He thanked the German institutions for the rigorous investigation they had conducted to provide, ‘evidence of the physical trauma our people have suffered and which matches our horrible history . . . We can never undo the hurtful and heinous acts of the past, but what we can and should do is acknowledge this part of our shared history. We take comfort in this gift of return today’ (Miller 2019: np).

In her response, Eva-Maria Stange, Minister for Education and Research for Saxony, was close to tears and asked for forgiveness. She drew attention to what had been a legal requirement for the repatriation to take place, ‘Today, with great respect for the cultural and religious traditions in Australia, human bones are *rehumanised* that for

Figure 2: Boxes containing the human remains, decorated with lines of cloth showing ornaments and colours from their home region. Australian Embassy, Berlin, 2019. Photo by Carsten Wergin.

too long had been regarded as mere “objects” (lifePR 2019, trans. C. W., emphasis added).

I had learnt from Birgit Scheps-Bretschneider, curator for Australia and Oceania at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden who spearheaded the restitution project, that a possible return of objects held in museums depends to a significant degree on their monetary value. The human remains in question had been catalogued as objects. To attribute a value to them was for obvious reasons an impossible task but remained a requirement. Thus, it was the ‘re-humanising’ that the minister referred to that allowed for the remains to be returned, because it made this act of attributing value to them obsolete.

David Puertollano had added that his delegation wanted to bring their culture to Berlin and share it with those who had helped make the returns possible: ‘It’s all part of the healing process’ (Miller 2019: np). And Lynette Wood, Australia’s ambassador for Germany, confirmed that, ‘it’s part of Australia’s reconciliation process, too’ (Miller 2019: np). Finally, the small grey boxes were carefully packed into a

large white container to be sent to Australia with special diplomatic permits.

This marked the end of the first episode in a transcultural collaboration that continues until this day. Yawuru and Karajarri as well as curators at the Ethnographic Museums of Saxony have documented the repatriation process in much detail. Their travels were accompanied by Ramu Productions, Australia's first Aboriginal-owned film company, who produced a documentary. In Broome, a memorial site currently being constructed where the remains and also cultural objects will be returned. In addition to a permanent display of the film, the site known as the *Gwarinman Memorial and Resting Place* will include a memorial walk to tell the stories of the victims. Funding has been provided through grants by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet as well as the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications in Australia. The latter also sponsors the 'Wanggjarli Burugun (We are Coming Home) exhibition' that is to tour German and Australian museums, with the purpose to, 'tell of a shared history between the communities of Yawuru (Australia) and Saxony (Germany)' (GA65707).

The key component of this process was to rehumanise what had been classified as objects. This move opened up the possibility of repatriating the remains because it allowed for them to be freed from the 'politics of value' that had been inflicted on them (Appadurai 1986). As objects, technicians would ask of them: What is the value (in economic terms) of this? How much will the state lose? Reclassified as human remains, these alleged objects became worthless in technical terms. While their economic value had been impossible to determine and, as a consequence, had stopped any repatriation from being negotiable, re-humanizing them opened up the pathway for restitution.

This transformation from cultural object back to human remains was enabled by a 'shared stewardship' between museum staff and Indigenous community members. Their collaborative efforts produced the necessary evidence. As described by David Puertollano (see above), this meant the start of a healing process for the ancestors from violent and unethical diminution. It also offered a path towards healing for other people involved and, in particular, for those from German institutions and society. The fact that the Indigenous community allowed for the latter to play a substantial role in the ceremonial act was a significant act in the redress of the initial colonial encounter. To what degree and on what level healing has by now been achieved is central to my ongoing research but remains subject to further enquiry.

There also remains reason to criticise the scope and settlement of restitutions in general. Those conducted in 2013 and 2014 by the Charité, for example, were not so much to generate further collaborations between European collections, but for the Australian government to highlight its efforts to reconcile with its Indigenous communities (Winkelmann 2020). What can already be said, however, is that the 2019 restitution project was able to draw on the diasporic condition of the ancestors to form a new alliance that continues into the future – in a ‘third space’ across borders, and beyond the geographical entities of Europe and Australia.

Conclusion

The repatriation of cultural objects and human remains can turn into transformative experiences that motivate ‘healing through heritage’ among diverse parties involved. While ‘shared stewardship’ might be criticised as a poignant slogan that runs the risk of overriding a painful past, the ‘third space’ that opened up with the repatriation experience described above – the *buru* that was created by the delegation through multisensory engagement – united participants across spatial borders and heritage-temporalities. The significant contribution that the Yawuru and Karajarri delegation made in this process when it transformed the place into *buru* points to the need for museums to have local communities play a more vital role in the decolonial project, regardless of whether this entails letting go of some of their content.

This is where heritage unfolds its transformative potential for institutions as much as Indigenous community members, even relatively random witnesses to ceremonies like the ones this text draws upon. It demonstrates how museum content can help us reassess heritage narratives and histories of knowledge production, removing gatekeepers and moving the conversation across fictitious borders into the realm of the properly political. In this sense, the *Gwarinman Memorial and Resting Place* is to become a significant site with transformative potential in the global heritage-scape.

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