

Institution: Bath Spa University		
Unit of Assessment: 28: History		
Title of case study: Repatriating Human Remains: Changing Museum Practice		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Sarah Morton	Senior Lecturer in Heritage	5/9/2016 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Morton's research at Bath Spa University has made important contributions to the ongoing debate on the repatriation of human remains from museum collections.</p> <p>Focusing on repatriations of ancestral human remains from The Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCS) as a case study, Morton's research has impacted on practice and decision making at RCS. The Director of Museums and Special Collections at RCS stated that Morton's research on the materiality of the remains repatriated from RCS "has been significant in stimulating conversation knowledge exchange" between RCS and other institutions (E1).</p> <p>In addition to impacting on policy and practice at RCS, Morton's research has informed wider repatriation practice and contributed to sector and public debates on restitution and decolonisation. A senior museum professional stated that Morton's research publications "have been important for museum staff beyond [RCS], including for my own practice as keeper of Science and Technology at the National Museum of Scotland" (E5). Morton's interviews and discussions with members of Indigenous communities in Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii have also helped to foster relationships between museums and those communities (E2).</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Morton's research 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), which as a leading medical institution holds a particularly high number of human remains. Morton's RCS case study considers three key areas relevant for the museum sector worldwide: the impact of repatriation on museum landscapes; the journey of the repatriated remains; the repatriation archives' future potential and meaning within a post-colonial context.</p> <p>Restitution is one of the 'most important, yet emotive and contentious issues facing Western museums in the twenty-first century' (Tythacott & Arvanitis, 2014, p1). The repatriation of the human remains of Indigenous peoples removed within a colonial context poses particularly strong ethical questions and 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. Following the publication of DCMS 'Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums' (2005), many UK museums with human remains collections have developed their own human remains policies based on the principles of respect and consultation. 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. Given the ongoing debates around the display of human remains and the colonial legacy of ancestral remains and material culture held in European museums, a better understanding of the legacies of the repatriation process on the different stakeholders involved is required in order to inform policy, practice and public understanding.</p> <p>Morton's research focuses on the repatriations from RCS to Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii to address this gap. Exploring repatriations from the significant and high-profile collection of the Museums and Archives of the RCS both gives visibility to Morton's research and makes it relevant for museum professionals and researchers working in wider contexts.</p> <p>The impact of repatriation on museum landscapes</p> <p>Morton's research explores the legacies of RCS repatriations between 2001 and 2011. These repatriation events consisted of returns of over 80 sets of remains to four locations: Tasmania -</p>		

Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (May 2002-2009); Australia - Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research (April 2003); New Zealand - Te Papa Tongarewa (November 2007); Hawaii - Hui Malama (September 2011). The research made 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. Morton's research illustrates the complexities of the repatriation process and how it intersects with issues of Indigenous land rights, health, sovereignty and politics at local, national and state levels (R1).

As well as looking in depth at the legacies of the RCS repatriations, Morton's research has also provided analysis and a deeper understanding of the impact of repatriation on museum practice across institutions in the United Kingdom (R2). Through interviews with staff at the RCS, the Natural History Museum, Oxford University Museum of Natural History, Manchester Museum, and The British Museum, along with ethnographic observations, Morton's research casts new light on the changing attitudes and practices relating to repatriation in UK museums, and demonstrates that in challenging and problematising that authority, repatriation has contributed to a re-articulation of museum ethics, the development of new consultative approaches and the formation of new relationships (R2). As such, the research also highlights the ways in which an awareness of cultural sensitivities surrounding human remains and an appreciation of the multiple and shifting meanings they have, has created new networks around the collections, as museums consult on issues of care and respectful display with source communities, as well as sharing new understandings and areas of debate with museum visitors and other groups of stakeholders (R2).

The journey of the repatriated remains

What the journey of the ancestral remains repatriated by RCS illustrates is the emotive materiality of the remains, and the agency they and the distributed archive have as actors in social networks. Rather than framing repatriation as a post-colonial act, Morton makes clear it should be understood as part of a process of decolonisation in which there is space for discussion, disagreement and debate amongst all stakeholders. Her contribution to *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Repatriation* (R2) focuses on the impact that repatriation has had on UK museums. Morton advocates for a more nuanced and contextually sensitive understanding that recognises the role of the human remains in social interactions that impact on the emotional geographies of museum practice.

Through a series of in-depth interviews carried out with representatives from Indigenous communities, including the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Corporation, the Ngāti Te Ata, the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority, and the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (R1, Appendix 1), Morton's research also highlights the complexities encountered once remains have been returned to their country of origin. Repatriated remains are often still stored in museums many years after their return, while communities may struggle to find burial sites and have difficulty covering the cost of burial (R1). Repatriation can be a unifying process that brings connection to family; however, the feelings of obligation and responsibility towards ancestral remains, expressed by many of the Indigenous people interviewed as part of Morton's research, mean that the repatriation of ancestral remains can be practically and emotionally challenging for communities (R1).

The repatriation archives

Morton's research identified that a significant legacy of repatriation for UK museums is the documentation that museums continue to hold (R1). While the museum sector has engaged in much discussion about the repatriation of human remains and restitution of cultural artefacts, Morton has uncovered new understandings of the meanings, use and management of documentation once the objects to which it relates have left the collections.

When items are deaccessioned from the collections, copies of this information, as well as the records of the deaccessioning process itself, are gathered together to create an 'exit file'. The exit files provided Morton with a rich and detailed source of information from which to reconstruct the history of repatriation at RCS, and were also read against the grain to explore how repatriated material was, and is, conceptualised within the museum. The process of repatriation creates a distributed archive as information is added, reconfigured in new ways, and becomes multiple and mobile (R1). Morton's research has also opened up new understandings about the

importance of archive material for Indigenous groups, as well as prompting new questions about how archives should be managed within museums.

Overview and Dissemination

While Morton's research has focused on repatriations from the RCS and other UK institutions, and provides much needed histories of particular remains and particular institutions, her findings have implications for institutions worldwide, by highlighting the need for accessible and connected repatriation archives, and by providing a conceptual framework to rethink the museum as a site of death, and develop the relational ethics of human remains and repatriation as part of an ongoing process of decolonisation. Morton has disseminated her work not only through academic publication and reports but through workshops for the museums sector and a number of open access resources, which are available to museums and communities worldwide.

3. References to the research

R1: Morton, S (2018) [The Legacies of Repatriation of Human Remains from the Royal College of Surgeons: Final Project Report](#). Unpublished Report, The Royal College of Surgeons of England

R2: Morton, S (2020) ['Inside the human remains store: the impact of repatriation on museum practice in the United Kingdom.'](#) In: Fforde, C, Keeler, H and McKeown, T, eds. *The Routledge companion to indigenous repatriation: return, reconcile, renew*. Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 902-917

4. Details of the impact

Morton's research has made important contributions to the ongoing debate on repatriation and had an impact on three key areas: policy and practice at the Royal College of Surgeons; sector practice and public understanding; fostering relationships with Indigenous communities.

Impact on Policy and Practice at RCS

Morton has made an important contribution to RCS policy and practice relating to the impacts of the repatriations, the current and future role of the human remains still in the collections and the potential for maintaining the relationships formed as part of the return process (E3). The debate around repatriation tends to centre on art historical and ethnographic collections and museums; Morton's work in the context of the RCS is significant, since it highlights the repatriation of human remains from medical collections, resulting in a widening of the discussion and opening up new issues for debate not only among curators, but also the medical and scientific stakeholders of the collection.

Based on Morton's research "the records the museum holds on repatriated material became recognised, collections records were enhanced and the details of the repatriations made available to staff and trustees" (E1). This has allowed RCS to respond to requests for information about their current and former holdings. The Director of Museums and Special Collections at RCS stated that Morton's research has supported the RCS to respond to requests for information about their current and former holdings:

An example being the evidence submitted to the Parliament of New South Wales in October 2019 in response to an enquiry about the whereabouts of the head of Pemulwuy, an Aboriginal warrior and political leader who has become a publicly recognised historical figure and subject of a high-profile repatriation campaign. (E1)

Information from the RCS archives was also provided to National Museum Australia (NMA). Although this information had been returned with the ancestral remains in 2003, Morton's research revealed that it had become separated from the remains and NMA did not have a copy and were not aware there was any further information held at RCS. As information about repatriated remains is key in being able to return them to the right community this was an important outcome of the project as it aided ongoing repatriation work.

Morton's research has been used to inform collections policy and decisions. Notably, Morton presented the key project findings to the RCS Board of Trustees in 2018 to directly inform their discussion about the future display of the remains of Charles Byrne (popularly known as the

'Irish Giant', whose remains were on display in the Hunterian Museum at the RCS as an example of gigantism from the early 19th century until 2018), while her research has also impacted on wider discussions of the treatment of Charles Byrne after his death (E4).

Summarising the impact of Morton's research, the Keeper of Science & Technology at National Museums Scotland (former Director of Museums and Archives at the Royal College of Surgeons of England) stated that the *Legacies of Repatriation of Human Remains* project had allowed the RCS to:

to enhance its knowledge base associated with the remaining non-European collection, further develop and revise its policies on the treatment and use of human remains, and contribute to policy making and professional development within the museum sector. The project also provided resources and empirical evidence to inform future discussions around repatriation, the treatment of human remains retained within collections and the development of relations with communities to whom remains have been repatriated. (E5)

The current Head of Museum Collections at RCS stated the importance of medical museums having "the same high standards of ethics that govern medical practice more generally" and asserted that Morton's review of past repatriation had better informed "practices related to the care, use and display of human tissue today" (E2).

Informing Sector Practice and Public Understanding

Morton's work has informed sector approaches to repatriation through participation in events and workshops, and through the contribution to open access resources. These events allowed professionals from international museums to come together "to share their experiences of caring for human remains within a museum context, share experiences of repatriation and also to discuss the use of human remains in past, present and future in research" (E2).

Morton has also taken an active role in the recent Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG) events *Restitution: A View from the Regions* (July 2019; approximately 30 attendees) and *Decolonisation at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Brussels* (February 2020; 6 MEG members met with 4 staff from the museum) during which conversation between colleagues over the 3 days included restitution and repatriation. MEG are an international collective, whose members include museum professionals, academics, researchers & students, artists, activists and enthusiasts; their events focus on continual professional development for museum professionals and offer members "time to reflect" (E7). They have been evaluated as "tremendously rewarding..." "I've come away with lots of ideas for doing things back at work" (E7). The ongoing events on repatriation have been a place where MEG members are supported and are able to ask questions and get advice in a friendly, supportive environment. The Chair of MEG has stated that discussion and support on this subject is important: "The urgency of acknowledging and working through the colonial nature of our institutions and collections is crucial, but many are working in isolation with little, or unstable, institutional support... In other contexts there is the institutional will, coupled with anxiety over risks to funding. We feel sharing best practice and making changes collectively can help" (E7). Morton's involvement in MEG events contributes to this support network.

Morton's report on the legacies of the repatriation of human remains from The Royal College of Surgeons of England stands as a valuable resource, not only for the organisations involved in the research (E3), but also by forming part of the Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG) Repatriation Resource, a free, open access resource for museum professions, originating communities, research institutions and anyone interested in museums and repatriation. The resource aims to extend MEG's "advocacy and support to museum colleagues and originating communities globally" (E7). In this way, Morton's research provides new knowledge to a wide network of museum experts and has initiated new discussions about creating new models of best practice for managing archives and documentation relating to repatriation.

Morton's research has also been used to inform the wider public debates around restitution and decolonisation. This has included contributing to a Higher Education Today debate in February 2017 (E6), which has over 1480 views on YouTube, and responding to journalists enquires about repatriation. In a contribution to an article in the Guardian on repatriation (23rd April 2019),

which generated 538 comments from the public, Morton highlighted some of the key findings from her research, and added nuance to an often polarised debate by stating that “[t]here’s more thinking about collections from the point of view of how things were acquired and the circumstances they were taken in [...] people are addressing the colonial foundations of museums and challenging that” (E6).

Fostering Relationships with Indigenous Communities

In addition to contributing to new knowledge and understandings of the difficulties and complexities that emerge after repatriation, the time spent by Morton in Australia and New Zealand interviewing and talking with representatives from Indigenous groups worked to “develop and foster relationships with recipient communities” (E2).

Undertaking research in Australia and New Zealand also allowed Morton to feed into the Australian Research Council Funded *Return, Reconcile, Renew* project (2014-2020). She has contributed to the project publications and online resources (E9), which aim “to raise awareness and understanding about repatriation and assist repatriation practitioners and researchers in their efforts to bring Old People home” (E9). A member of the Repatriation Team at Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand's National Museum stated:

[Morton’s] work in the area of repatriation as part of the *Return Reconcile Renew* Project has been a real asset for those working in the South Pacific. Her knowledge and understanding of the collection and subsequent return of Ancestral Human Remains held in UK institutions has been an important addition to the project over all. Her work has already had an impact on museums to better understand repatriation, and will continue to do so going forward into the future, as she continues to provide the academic and museum sectors with valuable research into understanding our relationships with our Ancestors. (E8)

A senior member of the *Return, Reconcile, Renew* project stated that Morton “has used her research experience with RRR to feed into one of the key conversations to come out of the MEG events - an increasing appreciation of the importance of the repatriation archives, particularly the recognition that these archives contain Indigenous knowledge” (E9). By identifying that the archives are also important records of Indigenous activism and involvement in repatriation, Morton’s research has supported an ongoing process of decolonisation by creating and sharing the repatriation archive. She was able to provide information held by RCS to Indigenous communities in Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii along with the final project report.

This information and the project findings have been used to support research, education and activism around repatriation. However, in order to not reinforce colonial power relations, it was not felt to be ethical to ask Indigenous communities to provide testimonials for a process that will not provide any support for that community. This follows the ethical procedures agreed from the start of the research.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

E1: Statement from Director of Museums and Special Collections - Royal College of Surgeons

E2: Statement from Curatorial Staff at the Royal College of Surgeons

E3: Morton, S (2018) *The Legacies of Repatriation of Human Remains from the Royal College of Surgeons: Final Project Report*. Unpublished Report, The Royal College of Surgeons of England.

E4: Nash, C. (2018) ‘Making kinship with human remains: Repatriation, biomedicine and the many relations of Charles Byrne’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Volume: 36 issue: 5, pp 867-884.

E5: Testimonial from the Keeper of Science & Technology at National Museums Scotland (former Director of Museums and Archives at the Royal College of Surgeons of England)

E6: Public engagement evidence including [Guardian newspaper article](#) and interview on [Higher Education Today - Heritage Studies](#) Feb 2017

E7: Museum Ethnographers Group: [Repatriations; repatriation resources; MEG events](#)

E8: Testimonial from a member of the Repatriation Team at Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand's National Museum

E9: *Return, reconcile, renew* [project website](#) and testimonial from senior team member