

(REPATRIAT)ABLE BONES: TALES OF AMBIGUITY IN THE REPATRIATION  
NEXUS

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KEYWORDS

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# (Repatriat)Able Bones: Tales of Ambiguity in the Repatriation Nexus

## **\_Abstract**

European museums (of ethnography) and the material culture under their custody — a large portion of which was collected by the soldiers, explorers, and professional looters of the colonial era — are increasingly confronted by formerly colonized countries and Indigenous communities demanding the repatriation of their cultural patrimony. In this context, more and more ancestral human remains become the protagonists of their descendants' concerted efforts to bring them back home and offer them a reburial. Recognized as having been brought to Europe and its museums primarily as specimens for the racial theories that scientifically abetted the colonial agendas of power and control, these bones now find themselves at the center of the contemporary scenario of Europe's — delayed — reckoning with its colonial past. From an anthropological point of view, the current potential for repatriation to their native lands (and their capacity to acquire a 'repatriatable' status) should not be pinned down to singular meanings. Indeed, from their long museum sojourns and their unfolding repatriation adventures to their troubling stories of colonial acquisition, the reclaimed remains seem to condense diverse temporalities. Analytically speaking, this paper suggests that the bones' 'repatriatable status' does not entail their entrapment within a discursive system of binary oppositions, but their emergence as social persons that could be paralleled to other classical person-like 'things' in anthropology: the art objects of Alfred Gell, or the Maussian gift. Through such a theorization, the repatriatable remains are empowered to teach us that the social dramas around their potential return are not necessarily about the infliction of closure, but the activation of incessant cycles of reciprocity. Repatriation then, can be narrated otherwise: not as a story of resolution, but as one of irreducible ambiguity.

## **1\_Setting the Stage**

In the contemporary global context in which the effects of racism continue to ignite vigorous debates and social conflicts, any attempt to deal with issues that stretch back to racism's historical roots acquires a heightened urgency and relevance.<sup>1</sup> In this frame, the contemporary repatriations of museum-held human remains stir up long-stagnant waters, reviving not only dead bodies but also long-dormant transnational ties. The return to their societies of origin of the mortal remains that are today housed in Western institutions, and were acquired in colonial and unjust contexts, becomes an important step towards reconciliation and reparation worldwide.

Over the last few years, more and more items in the collections of ethnographic (and other) museums in Europe have been reclaimed back by their countries or communities of origin. Although the European museological landscape has been rather slow to follow the decolonization demands and institutional responses that had al-

ready made their appearance in the 1970s in other parts of the world (such as in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the USA), the resonance of recent colonial cultural property restitution claims in Europe has definitely increased.<sup>2</sup> Repatriation has gradually evolved into a fully-fledged social contract for European museums, and predominantly those of ethnology, pulling these institutions out of their comfort zones and directly to the center of the present postcolonial scenario. With their self-proclaimed benevolent custodianships being gradually debunked, museums are becoming increasingly subject to pressures to address the legacies of their colonial footings. This ongoing process has gradually brought them one step closer to the people from whom their holdings originate.

Despite the anti-colonial struggles that, at a social and communicative level, work to unravel the legacies of imperialist practices and to reverse their effects, normative logic continues to haunt the public image of postcolonial demands for change. More specifically, the normative reading, to which are relegated the return of human remains and other museum-held items seized in the course of colonization and in the midst of its violent machinations, seems to reproduce oppositional orderings premised on a binary logic. A series of binarisms that have been stabilized over millennia in Western discourse have thus found their contemporary expression in a distorted and essentialized reading that depicts repatriation as a conflict between Indigenous and Western, sacred and secular, science and religion, and/or (neo)colonial control and cultural survival. Crucially, by presenting the arguments that accompany repatriation cases as either for or against the return of the reclaimed museum items, normativity relegates repatriation claims to property disputes. In this way, it also reproduces the institutionalization of apathy toward the multifarious ways in which the lifeworlds of the claimant communities can be affected by the items they reclaim (or the absence thereof).

## **2\_Repatriation as an Intrinsically Intercultural Phenomenon**

Despite the normative lens through which public discourse tends to form around it, or the formal character that its institutional performance seems to demand, the practice of repatriation is an intrinsically indeterminate phenomenon. As the repatriation scholar Larissa Förster has remarked, a comparative look at repatriation cases from around the world demonstrates that the way in which this cultural event ultimately

unfolds is nevertheless resistant to the concerted institutional and governmental efforts for the standardization and professionalization of its multivalent character.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, such a resistance to formalization derives from the fact that the social dramas of repatriation are by definition the result of diverse relations between equally diverse stakeholders. I would add that the highly relational and non-standardizable nature of the repatriation processes worldwide stems from the ability of the postcolonial returns of museum items to mobilize some sort of Indigenous — or more precisely, intercultural — performance.<sup>4</sup> So as is customary, especially for the repatriation of ancestral bones, the occasion of their return unleashes a whole braid of rituals around these sensitive collection items. In this context, interculturality is far from a discursive asset, but emanates from the performance of a rich variety of oratory, dance, musical and ritual offerings that make their appearance alongside the no-less-ritual manifestations of institutional and formal obligations. As Laura Peers has insightfully suggested, it is precisely because of the embodied, affective, and deeply puzzling character of the ceremonies of repatriation that these museum dramas appear capable of making a difference.<sup>5</sup> Crucially, this difference may extend from the physical position of the bones of the dead to the manner of thinking by the living who attend to these bones' fates.

### **3 Institutional Retainment Reflexes and their Objectifying Implications for the Reclaimed Collection Items**

Despite the ever-increasing pace of restitution requests to European collections, the practice of repatriation continues to be seen as an exceptional event to such cultural institutions. As a matter of fact, it is often the arrival of a repatriation request that heightens a European museum's regard to the practice of repatriation from a skeptical and defensive stance to a wholly negative attitude toward both the claimants and the corresponding deaccession scenario. Fearing that their holdings could slip away from their custody and control, museums fortify themselves behind a logic of retention that operates independently of the reclaimed items themselves and merely reflects their own institutional *raison d'être*.

Museums tend to idealize themselves as rightful custodians, and plead numerous self-imposed obligations in the name of the presumably universal values that they are called upon to serve. At the same time, they adopt attitudes of fearfulness and suspicion<sup>6</sup>, advocating that repatriation claims constitute gestures of cultural diplomacy

that allege using museum items as the material touchstones of their political ploy. Though the sheer mass of objects kept in European museums would contradict any ‘emptying’ fantasy, such institutionalization of suspicion explains how the fear of the ‘empty museum’ has come to be repeatedly voiced in the public discourse that surrounds repatriation in Europe. Critical commentators have argued that such fears are symptoms of an “Abschottungs- und Abwehrreflex” [“shielding- and defense-reflex”]<sup>7</sup>, while others have explained that the uneasiness that the repatriation of human remains stirs among museums, stems from an underlying anxiety that the deaccessions of human bones shall “open the gates,” drastically intensifying restitution demands for looted art objects as well.<sup>8</sup>

This paper considers the possessiveness of European institutions regarding their holdings as a reflex action with crucial objectifying implications for the collection items. Crucially, in pinning down the reclaimed items to the singular identity of being “possessed” by the museum, the property counter-claim that a holding institution might raise tends to ignore or suppress the multiple relationships and complex provenance of the item at hand. But despite this objectifying condition and the powerless thing-like state that a property claim tries to impose, the collection items at the center of unfolding repatriation dramas are unequivocally socially active. As I shall show in the following paragraphs, it is the very nature of the repatriation process to defy the proprietary and one-dimensional institutional agendas that could otherwise dominate the social apparition of the collection items.

#### **4\_An Anthropological (Re)theorization of Repatriation**

Martin Skrydstrup has suggested that an anthropologically productive (re)theorization of repatriation should surpass normative interpretations by unpacking the discursive museological regime that classifies collection items into categories like “human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, objects of cultural patrimony, antiquities, art, artefacts, relics, or specimens.”<sup>9</sup> This would be a very relevant comment, given that, apart from the Indigenous ancestral remains with which this paper is concerned, claims for restitution are being made today in respect of a wide variety of (im)material items: from cultural artefacts, antiquities and Nazi spoliated art to intangible cultural property, like music, folktales or folk remedies. While there are good reasons to critically deconstruct conventional museological taxonomies though, repatriation pro-

cesses manifest a particularity, through which the suspicious stance of the holding institutions has the effect of further consolidating the diverse museological ‘categories’ into a singular state of wholly owned collection item. By indiscriminately framing the reclaimed human remains or other sensitive material as their property, the holding institutions attempt to impose a kind of “classificatory immobility”<sup>10</sup> that is supposed to reinforce the objectifying social vacuum in which these items have long been retained.

In order to account for these effects of repatriation claims, we need an approach that reimagines the potential categories of museum ‘artifacts’ not as institutional fixities, but as dynamic conditions that reveal the way in which a museum relates to its holdings. To this aim, this paper situates its starting point outside the boundaries of museological classifications, focusing instead on those museum-held human remains that have become the protagonists of repatriation adventures. Analytically speaking, the latter are characterized by the fact that their social agency appears refracted and scattered in many directions at the same time. To explore this diffusion of social agency, the present paper does not bring under its spotlight the human quality of these bones, but the diverse social relations in which they have become embedded as protagonists of repatriation dramas. More specifically, for as long as the remains are caught up in repatriation dramas, their anthropological exploration may not be concerned with their human origin as such, but with the multiple personifications they come to bear. Therefore, the present theorization of the reclaimed human bones as potent sites of meaning(s) mobilizes an anthropological technology of social animation in order to capture the multiple ways in which these bones may trigger phenomenological encounters.

Among the multiple and overlapping social relationships that take shape in the course of every repatriation drama — between the reclaimed items, the communities of origin, and the holding institutions — the proprietary rights that the holding institutions tend to present in their attempts to maintain the items in their collections reveal more about the institutions than the items in question. The crucial question, then, is how to assemble an anthropological approach that can narrate contemporary repatriation dramas through the multiple possible agencies that the reclaimed museum ‘objects’ may accumulate as their protagonists.

## **5\_ The Repatriatable (Human Remain)**

An anthropological theory of repatriation requires a perspective that would stimulate a reconception of museum categories into dynamic sociocultural products, whose potential reconfigurations are but the effects of the social relationships in which the concerned items may be embedded. In an insightful remark that concretizes this point and brings us back to museum-held human remains, Laura Peers succinctly points out that if there is any difference between the bones of the victims of Nazi medical experiments and those of Indigenous people, this is not in the nature of the mortal remains themselves, but in the social relationships in which they have existed and continue to exist, and in which a scientific interest over them may continue to elicit a purported status of asocial form and substance.<sup>11</sup> Such an observation attests to the fact that, in their emergence as the protagonists of contemporary repatriation dramas, the museum-held human remains can be conceptualized as an ambiguous kind of material culture. Analytically speaking, this ambiguous status is, as I shall now show, premised on the encounter between two analytical components: the dead human body and the repatriatable status.

### **5.1\_ The Dead Body**

A plethora of studies have shown us how human remains may be better understood as ambiguous things that are situated between life and death, subject and object, presence and absence.<sup>12</sup> While such a burgeoning body of literature insightfully re-envisioned the dead body as being located between vital substance and dead matter, the theorization of museum-held (and/or reclaimed) human remains continues to be subsumed in attempts to break down the tired dichotomies that were bequeathed to us by a well-entrenched Cartesian culture of thought. I argue that the repatriatable human remains can indeed defy the ontological separation of human and non-human, or living and dead. As a matter of fact, such an argument brings to mind the volition and sentience that the descendant Indigenous communities recognize in their ancestors' bones. So this perspective sheds light on the effects rather than the pure identities of the repatriatables. The ensuing theorization shall be then engaged with the remains' ability to emotionally and materially affect those relating to them, rather than simply represent pre-given and well-bounded identities.

As a matter of fact, in a very insightful treatise on Western culture's fascination throughout history with decapitated heads and skulls, Frances Larson has offered a

liberating break from normative perspectives, celebrating the ontological instability of the dead body:

a severed head upsets our easy categories, because it is simultaneously a person *and* a thing. It is always both and neither. Each state reaffirms the other and negates it. It is here with us, and yet utterly alien. The severed head is compelling — and horrific — because it denies one of the most basic dichotomies we use to understand our world: that people and objects are defined in opposition to each other. It presents an apparently impossible duality.<sup>13</sup>

In a similar vein, the reclaimed human remains are found in the tension between vital substance and dead matter and can simultaneously accommodate person and object apparitions and interpretations. The contemporary postcolonial repatriation dramas are neither played out on simplistic binary grounds nor are symptomatic of a purported tension between modernity and tradition or between science and indigeneity — as many self-proclaimed modern and scientific voices would have it. I propose that these mortal remains are brought back to (social) life not simply because they are human but due to their ambiguous nature, as this stems from the multiple relational and performative affordances they are endowed with. But before unpacking the reclaimed bones' ambiguity, we should consider the place they occupy in the value systems, lived realities and contemporary claim-making of the Indigenous peoples asking for their return.

Anthropological attempts<sup>14</sup> to make sense of the cultural complexity of Melanesia — and Oceania more generally — have taught us that the subject-versus-object dichotomy is often experienced as an imposition of the West that has little to do with the everyday, quotidian experiences of these communities or the way they see themselves. More specifically, Marilyn Strathern has made the groundbreaking proposition that even the very concept of 'society' fails to capture the nature of sociality in Melanesian societies. As a matter of fact, rather than reproducing the purported antinomy between the 'individual' and 'society' Strathern explored Melanesian sociality through the axiom that a person is the site of plural and composite relationships, and, as such, can be analyzed as a social microcosm.<sup>15</sup>

In order to connect to the contemporary Indigenous claims for repatriation the Strathernian analytical shift from the concept of society to that of sociality — understood as “the creating and maintaining of relationships,”<sup>16</sup> — we may consider the example of Indigenous Australians.<sup>17</sup> For Aboriginal communities, their ancestral coun-

try is a living entity that engenders and nurtures all forms of life in a perpetual continuum of birth. The removal of their Ancestors' remains is believed to be a wound suffered by the land, because the latter is aware of the torment that the ancestral spirits endure for as long as the bones to which they are attached are kept away from its maternal<sup>18</sup> care. Crucially, these ancestral spirits, or the 'Old People,' as they are respectfully called, are also believed to have the power to affect the wellbeing and fates of the living, should the latter fail or neglect to ensure their return to the Aboriginal land's care. Recognizing the relations and obligations binding the ancestral remains to the land and the living descendants is crucial because it reveals that, rather than being symbolical or diminished by time, the colonial injustice entailed by the removal of the ancestral remains continues to exert a powerful impact on lived realities today.

Additionally, given the increasing public revitalization of Indigenous subjectivities that has been occurring on a global scale, it is important to highlight that in the social dramas surrounding issues of wider recognition, repatriation and (land) rights, the Indigenous is neither an a priori meaning nor a historical remnant. Rather, and in confirmation of ambiguity's analytical relevance for this discussion, postcolonial Indigeneity is actively claimed and performed as a subject position through which both ancestors and descendants are co-constituted. Taking into consideration the ambiguity permeating Indigenous peoples' sociality and claim-making practices, how can we proceed to anthropologically frame the very museum-held ancestral remains that they reclaim?

Rather than theorizing the repatriatable human remains through subject/object and life/death dualisms, my intent here is to shed light on the fluidity with which such designations make their appearance throughout the social dramas of repatriation.<sup>19</sup> To this direction, the critical way in which the archaeologist Joanna Sofaer has unpacked and debunked the binary-driven way in which the archaeological methodology has traditionally constructed its 'archaeological bodies' is insightful.<sup>20</sup> Sofaer points out that most archaeological analyses of buried bodies are prescribed by a deep disciplinary binarism between person and object, which is manifested in a series of dichotomies: inside (skeletal body)/outside (fleshed body), dead/living, object/subject, science/social science, and ultimately nature/culture.<sup>21</sup> But as Sofaer proposes, the focus on the material should be coupled with an attention to the cultural; for this reason, she suggests, bodies would be better studied "as material culture."<sup>22</sup> To follow this ap-

proach and delve deeper into its implications for the theorization of the reclaimed human remains, the next sections introduce the notion of the ‘repatriatable.’

## **5.2\_ The Repatriatable**

A repatriation story begins with the transformation of a collection item into what Ann Kakaliouras has insightfully coined as ‘repatriatable’<sup>23</sup>: the status described by this adjective is brought into existence through a repatriation claim that reaches the holding institution, bringing with it a complex set of relations that invest the item with a new sociality. Legislative and institutional arrangements and provenance research inquiries, as well as campaigns, protests and movements that extend outside the museum walls, are only some of the spheres of public action in which a repatriatable item may participate. Crucially, though, the sudden presence of this item in public debates, news media, social media, and expert networks not only indicates the contests over its meaning; it also suggests its ability to act persuasively and publicly and to potentially mobilize social change.

Because of its ambiguous condition of lying between its claimants and its holders, and of surfacing in the midst of a transitional moment of crisis, a repatriatable collection item can accommodate diverse and seemingly irreconcilable understandings simultaneously. At this moment in their museum careers, these collection items transform into an ontological and epistemological category of their own.<sup>24</sup> But how does this ambiguous status translate into social agency, and what is it exactly that a ‘repatriatable’ human remain may become capable of throughout this particular phase of its residence in the museum?

Analytically speaking, a repatriatable human remain or cultural object acquires a say in its destiny precisely through its capacity to exert its effect back on the actors that attend to its fate and meaning. Kakaliouras has followed a Latourian<sup>25</sup> account of world-making which extends agency to non-human actants, in order to argue that the ‘repatriatables’ are not just passive recipients of legislative and policy reforms, but facilitators of encounters and transmitters of knowledge. Kakaliouras’s description with regard to their socio-cultural agency is revealing:

Repatriables, even before any return, also marshal people to act differently around them (Latour 2005); they receive visits and ministering from Native ritual specialists as well as increased sensitivity from others, including museum or institutional staff and anthropological researchers.<sup>26</sup>

This perspective entails that the repatriatable may be used and understood not only as an adjective that can characterize human remains or other collection items, but also as a noun — more precisely a nominal adjective — that denotes a new and self-contained class of museum objects: namely, those caught up in repatriation claims and disputes.

As succinctly described by Ann M. Kakaliouras, the ‘repatriatable’ constitutes a new category of contemporary material culture.<sup>27</sup> In her call for an anthropology of repatriation, the physical anthropologist coined the notion to designate specifically those human remains that have the potential to be returned to their descendant Native American tribes under the NAGPRA legislation. Beyond the specific context for which Kakaliouras utilizes it though, the term may turn out to be a productively malleable concept that could be used for any type of museum item that may get endowed with the prospect of homecoming, no matter in what kind of museum it is held, where in the world, or which sort of jurisdiction it falls under — if any at all. On what grounds, then, should a ‘repatriatable’ be defined?

## **6 Bringing Together an Anthropological Theory of Repatriation**

This paper approaches the multiple relationships in which the reclaimed human remains are embedded as a dynamic confirmation of their relational personhood.<sup>28</sup> In this way, the ambiguity emanating from their multiple social agencies can be utilized as a creative channel of theorization rather than an analytical obstacle to be resolved.

Through the dense and knotted set of relations in which they participate, the reclaimed human remains can be insightfully theorized following the British anthropologist Alfred Gell (1945–1997) and his theory of art as expressed in his posthumously published and most debated monograph *Art and Agency*.<sup>29</sup> Deeply inspired by Melanesian anthropological readings and anchored in the anthropological problem of the (human) person, Gell’s work on agency opens up a new pathway through which to theorize the contemporary social drama of repatriation. More precisely, proposing that an object’s agency constitutes a form of distributed personhood — the way in which Gell managed to speak about material efficacy without attributing life-force to objects — is particularly relevant to any anthropological engagement with ancestral human remains.

Crucially, Gell's theory of art should be jointly read with the powerful theory of personhood and agency with which Marilyn Strathern drew on Indigenous cultural categories and worldviews, proposing that both "people and things assume the social form of persons."<sup>30</sup> Strathern's idea that both objects and persons have thing-like and person-like becomings<sup>31</sup> is in its turn particularly relevant to the theorization of the reclaimed bones, exactly because the latter's ambiguousness stems from their capacity to be at the same time both persons and objects, defying neat classification.

## **7\_A Tripartite Continuum**

The following section unravels upon a tripartite continuum and presents three distinct temporal fragments, as these could be simultaneously accommodated by the Indigenous human remains caught up in repatriation processes. More specifically, to be examined below are the following three 'becomings' that these troubling museum-held bones come to condense: 1. their treatment as 'things' (or, more precisely, specimens of racial science) 2. their pertaining to human beings (through the official voice of contemporary restituting institutions), and finally, 3. their potential unearthing as social persons (through an intercultural arsenal of diverse ritual performances). Examining these three circumstances with regard to the distinct appearances that the human remains have taken in their frame allows me to provide a deliberately fragmentary narrative that demonstrates the multiple roles and identities that the reclaimed bones accommodate once promoted as the protagonists of these postcolonial processes.

The following discussion of the three conditions moves gradually from views that generate objectification, to deliberately ambiguous ones that celebrate personhood. At a first and maximum level of objectification, I shall examine the historical treating of the museum-held human remains in the frame of racial science. Next, I will consider the postcolonial notion of 'rehumanization' to show that, even if it embraces repatriation and it is definitely less normative, it remains analytically incapable of capturing the ambiguous state of the repatriatable remains. Finally, I shall present the repatriation rituals through which the repatriatable human remains have the opportunity to transform into social persons.

### **7.1\_The Reclaimed Bones as Socio-Historical Processes (of Dehumanization)**

Delving into the acquisition stories of the human remains that are today involved in repatriation processes is an inherent part of the phenomenon of repatriation. Most of

the bones that are today reclaimed and returned from Western institutions were removed from their living communities and resting places at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Back then, the mortal remains of Indigenous peoples had become collectibles in the service of that era's scientism of racial theories, which supported and legitimated imperial subjugation and colonial expansion. The theorization of the way in which the dead bodies of the 'other' were collected and studied, unravels the dehumanization that Frantz Fanon has so poignantly described as the essence of colonial domination: namely, that "systematic negation of the other person," that "furious determination to deny that person all attributes of humanity."<sup>32</sup>

### **The Biologization of Anthropology in the 1880s and 1890s**

The more that we consider the wider context within which scientific collecting unfolded from the late eighteenth century to the early years of the twentieth century, the more it becomes clear that the objectification of the Other's body was not solely instantiated by tales of grave-plundering, but constituted a process, which unfolded on a continuum of life and death. This observation has crucial analytical implications, as it can shed light on the reclaimed bones as not just human forms and substances but also socio-historical processes.

The 'racial anthropology' of the turn of the 19th century and early decades of the 20th evolved into a means through which the dominated bodies (both dead and alive) of the colonized were made to deliver racial narratives, or more precisely, evidentiary data that would attest to their own inferiority and the supposed evolutionary vigor of the white body. In this context, vast collections of bodies and body parts were collected and accumulated in Europe in order to satisfy the academic and popular audiences' craving for 'samples' of the inferior and sub-human non-European races. In the eyes of the involved scientific community, the identification of pure racial types required the relentless search for comparative samples, with skull shape and brain size dominating the center of these measuring activities.<sup>33</sup> Throughout this process of bodily quantification, dimensions came to play a crucial role, rendering real and reified the idea of racial type, allowing it to transform from mental abstraction and social construct into a set of seemingly impartial scientific facts and methods.<sup>34</sup> Crucially, rather than an outcome of solely scientific and methodological developments, the

consolidation of race theory should be examined as a manifestation of that era's political and social realities, as a collective "mid-Victorian mania."<sup>35</sup>

### **'Distributed Personhood' at the Instigation of Raciology**

As we examine the historical context in which to be a race scientist substantially meant to be "a measurer, a student of the skull, and to dwell in museums"<sup>36</sup> and in which purported evidence was manipulated to fit preconceived theories,<sup>37</sup> Gell's concept of 'distributed personhood' can be most insightful with regard to the way in which the mortal remains of the colonized were transformed into collectibles heavily invested with the intentionalities of their collectors and owners. Seen through the Gellian lens, the collected human remains are not just passive symbols of the colonial power and of an alleged racial inferiority; quite to the contrary, much-needed light is shed on the fact that these bones have historically generated authority for those who removed them from their burial places and examined them in faraway metropolitan centers. In other words, the collected human remains have embodied — concurrently with their subjection to the objectification and inhuman treatment meted out by colonial actors — a post-mortem agency<sup>38</sup>: that is, a kind of effective agency that operated to establish the authority of colonial rulers and undermine the status of the descendant living communities. Seen as marketable items that could be extracted from the ground like natural resources, the ancestral remains embodied for the collectors the opportunity not simply to make a profit by selling them to the scientific community,<sup>39</sup> but also, and perhaps most crucially, to acquire "a sense of belonging to an emerging intellectual elite committed to the betterment of the human condition through the pursuit of science."<sup>40</sup>

The curiosity that anthropologists developed towards the end of the century with respect to the origin of human beings and their view that societies could be classified along an evolutionary scale that ran savage-barbaric-primitive-civilized became particularly appealing to the colonial regimes.<sup>41</sup> With 'primitive' peoples being systematically presented as closer to apes than to civilized Europeans, or as evolutionary re-tards, 'stuck' at the purported lowest levels of human evolution, their subjugation was presented as a 'natural' consequence of racial progress. Crucially, it was on the same basis that the colonial genocides and systematic atrocities inflicted on the colonized populations would be justified and/or briskly forgotten. Although the status of cran-

iometry and of other pseudo-scientific methods that celebrated white people and the rise of European civilization started to fade away across the 20th century, the repositories of Western institutions were left with thousands of mortal remains of Indigenous and oppressed populations.

Racial science unfolded as an essentially teleological and applied science: both its experts and its theorems were most often caught in the tautology of confirming by nature what men were doing by colonial politics.<sup>42</sup> Crucially, though, the purportedly objective evidence that physical anthropology and its associated disciplines provided may only prove the involved scientists' identity as willing assistants of the imperial enterprise.<sup>43</sup>

## **7.2 Postcolonial Rehumanizations**

The term 'rehumanization' is being increasingly mobilized in repatriation discussions with the aim of reversing, at least at a communicative level, the objectification to which the reclaimed bones were subjected after their acquisition. Given that the creation of empathy is today expressed as a priority for European museums, the adoption of novel concepts like this operate not just at the level of discourse or narrative, but also at the level of relationships, affecting the way in which museums communicate their commitment to social change and interact with the communities in which their holdings originate. The following two repatriation cases derive from the German-speaking museum landscape and constitute two insightful instantiations of the legislative and rhetorical mobilization of the postcolonial notion of 'rehumanization.'

In 2012, the repatriation of the remains of Klaas and Trooi Pienaar, which had been smuggled by the Austrian anthropologist Dr. Rudolf Pöch — the father of anthropology for many — out of South Africa into Austria in 1909, marked a turning point in Europe regarding the view and performance of the return of human remains. Austrian regulations did not allow for the remains — classified as cultural artefacts — to be extradited as human beings, and the Austrian government suggested that the bones either be packaged and sent by post, or sent as luggage on a plane. The South African government, however, insisted they be returned in coffins.<sup>44</sup> To accommodate the South African government's wishes, the holding museum thus changed the bones' classification from cultural artefacts to human remains. This was the first time that remains de-accessioned and returned from a European state patrimony were recognized

and treated as human beings rather than “heritage or cultural objects.”<sup>45</sup> As this case suggests, museological classifications can have crucial effects that the study of repatriation should definitely take into consideration.

Moving to the German context, in October 2017, the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden was involved in the repatriation of ancestral human remains, or *iwi kūpuna*, back to their homelands of Hilo, Honolulu, and Wai‘alae in the Hawaiian Islands.<sup>46</sup> Doing justice to twenty-six years of repatriation requests from Hawaiian individuals and institutions, this repatriation act was the first in the history of the Free State of Saxony. Significantly, the museum went on to coin the term ‘rehumanization,’ using it in a wide range of public occasions and official statements, marking the first time this notion was so persistently adopted by a restituting museum with regard to the deaccession of human remains.

While the official voice of restituting institutions presents rehumanization as the effect of repatriation processes and officially recognizes the human origin of the bones, the anthropological validity of rehumanization as such is with regard to its social invocation. This is because an anthropological account of repatriation is concerned with the way in which human remains, no matter how rhetorically laden they may be and what legislative mutations they may cause, perform some sort of changes with regard to the way in which the living attend to these bones and their rightful place. It is precisely in this sense that the concept of ‘rehumanization,’ which is commonly used by stakeholders and commentators favorably positioned with regard to the practice of repatriation, should be taken into consideration.

Despite the reconciliatory and justice-making effects that the ‘rehumanization’ concept may celebrate, theorizing it as a new, restituted identity of the human remains would amount to falling into an analytical trap. This is because rehumanization appears to epitomize some sort of closure or teleological perspective on these postcolonial dramas of return: in fact, the notion promotes a narrative that sees the repatriated ancestral remains as bones unambiguously restored to their human origin. The problem, then, lies precisely in the fact that the remains’ return to their homelands and communities is depicted as a return to humanness. Such a reading, I suggest, could reproduce the same polarizing argument that has traditionally framed museum-held mortal remains as either objects or ancestors.

In the next section, I consider ritual aspects and episodes, in order to show that the ambiguity of the social dramas of repatriation and their protagonists stems from the way in which the affective aspects of these postcolonial museum dramas are experienced.

### **7.3 Personification through the Repatriation Rituals**

The international repatriations of Indigenous ancestral remains by Western museums, universities and other institutions constitute socially dense meeting occasions that are determined by highly cross-cultural dynamics. Coordinated by both museum staff and claimants, the formal handover ceremonies involve not only public declarations and formal witnessing of reconciliation, but also Indigenous oration, prayer, and song, through which the ancestors are asked to bless the space and the social relations.<sup>47</sup> Simultaneously, through formal (and no-less-ritual) stagings, the previously holding and currently restituting institution has the opportunity to publicly condemn colonial collecting practices and confirm that the guardianship of the remains has returned to the descendant community.

In the following extract, experienced museum professional and repatriation scholar Laura Peers shares some reflections on her involvement in the organization of a repatriation of ancestral human remains:

I have provided picnic rugs for rituals on soggy English ground, purchased a portable barbecue for an outdoor smudging, persuaded my neighbors to dig a hole in their lawn for a bonfire in order to feed ancestors, and recruited my head of department to guard the gate into a garden behind the School of Anthropology premises in central Oxford to ensure privacy for a ritual involving the release of a soul.<sup>48</sup>

This extract reveals that as repatriation processes unfold, multiple rituals are being staged, and a significant degree of social creativity emanates from the adaptation and flexibility involved in their occurrence. Crucially, it is not only the Indigenous claimant communities that participate in the staging of the rites, but also the museum staff members who deliberately assist the repatriation processes, and who have in many cases shown formidable flexibility in circumventing rigid institutional structures that could potentially hamper the ritual performance of the bones' return.

## **Gell's Intentional Psychology in Repatriation Ceremonies**

In the context of the repatriation rituals, Gell's intentional psychology is evidenced by a series of diverse performances, not only by the receiving delegate but also by the restituting institution. In parallel, material items like clothing and adornment items, flowers, food, and nations' flags become equally meaningful as they are meticulously incorporated in the museum settings at the occasion of restitution events. Crucially, their emergence in the midst of the cultural drama of repatriation ceremonies performs an attribution of agency. These material items constitute functional items, in that they accompany the deceased person, the ancestor, into a route that starts with the restitution of the remains and most often reaches its final point with their reburial in the ancestral land. Rather than some sort of passive aesthetic background framing repatriation, the rituals and the material culture of the repatriation ceremonies are indispensable in the attribution of intentional psychology to the human remains being repatriated. As such, they act as channels for the care and social creativity that can be invested by the claimant descendant communities, the restituting institution's staff and whoever else has chosen to engage with these bones' fates.

Drawing on Strathern's idea that the 'ritual' stands for those "public techniques through which a person is made (created, brought forth) to appear in a transformed state,"<sup>49</sup> we may propose that Indigenous forms of ritual practice, together with the no-less-ritual formal proceedings of the repatriating institutions, are instrumental in the personification of museum-held human remains. Moving beyond repatriation readings that would merely consider the efforts of the claimant communities to bring back home their ancestral bones, accounting for the multiple rituals of a repatriation process allows us to speak of the relationships that are formed as a repatriation claim progresses towards its resolution (or simply stagnates).

Rituals and their materialities may, in other words, reveal the disorderly distribution of intentional psychology at diverse moments and by diverse actors who have chosen to engage with the human remains. Social creativity appears to be a prerequisite for the performance of rituals, while rituals are instrumental in investing the remains with diverse intentionalities: gradually, the repatriatable human bones appear as social persons capable of acting and influencing those at their vicinity. Surrounded though by multiple actual scenarios, histories, and future possibilities, the ephemeral positions that they have occupied are deeply ambiguous and indeterminate. It is in

this sense that the social ambiguity of the reclaimed human remains can be theorized as a sort of ephemeral yet very versatile social agency: one that proves that infusing personhood and placing material culture at the center of our concerns is a shared and thoroughly contemporary practice.

### **8\_ Ensuing Analytical Observations: *When is a Repatriatable?***

The three ‘becomings’ of the repatriatable human remains discussed in the above section reveal that a repatriatable item does not appear as a single image but accommodates diverse social apparitions, which are in turn anchored in diverse temporalities. Theorized as a multitemporal material palimpsest, a repatriatable (human remain) can be analytically mobilized for its capacity to simultaneously attest to diverse temporal moments of inscription. As the reclaimed items are reconstituted across the lines of multitemporal social relations, they are surrounded by webs of negotiations and become the protagonists in a series of arguments, counter-arguments, and questions addressing both their future fates and their pasts: under which circumstances did the holding institution obtain full rights of ownership over them, how were they acquired in the first place, and where exactly will they re-buried (if at all) after their repatriation? Crucially, it is by getting enmeshed in multiple questions and social relationships that the reclaimed collection items come to occupy more person-like modes. The advent of the repatriation claim has in other words the effect of a sudden and intrinsic multiplication of the reclaimed item’s meaning(s). It is in this sense that a repatriatable human remain comes to qualify for what Strathern has called ‘dividual’: something/somebody whose personhood is the sum of the faceted array of relationships in which she participates.<sup>50</sup>

It is a matter of fact that prior to their involvement in a repatriation adventure, museum-held human remains are found in the univocal condition of being wholly owned possessions (property) of the museum in which they are held.<sup>51</sup> In such a condition, property is played out as an overarching relationship that imposes non-optional obligations, overriding other possibilities and reducing the concerned collection items to their most thinglike versions or least socially active modes. The long-held subjugation of the remains to singular interpretations could be seen as one of the most objectifying — and, again, non-optional — expressions of classificatory immobility in museums. Performing them as wholly owned and detaching them from their diverse rela-

tional understandings,<sup>52</sup> such institutional pronouncements tend to deprive the collection items of their very ability to have personhood.

The status of ‘repatriability’ amounts to an ambiguous and potentially disruptive re-personification of the bones. Even if this re-personification constitutes the sum of the biographical fragments surfacing in the present, it is simultaneously anchored in diverse temporalities. On the basis of this observation, I suggest reformulating the initial question of ‘what is a repatriable?’ to ‘*when* is a repatriable?’.

### **9\_Able to Condense Diverse Temporalities**

A common and core argument that Indigenous claimant communities have presented is that the retention of their ancestors’ bones “in cardboard boxes in the basements of museums, in the private collections of grave looters and body snatchers” amounts to “past and present desecration.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the bones, preserved soft tissue, hair, nails, and other human remains that are today kept in museum collections are not only incriminating evidence of the dispossession and scientific objectification of Indigenous bodies and heritages but also material witnesses of ongoing attitudes of institutional negligence. For most descendant communities, engaging in efforts to recover the remains of their ancestors means having to directly confront the injustices that were inflicted during the colonial times upon their culture and people, and at the same time, endure a series of — very often — desensitized and arrogant attitudes on the part of the institutions that hold their ancestors’ bones.

The concurrent actualization of both past and present in the experience of the communities that claim them back, endows the ancestral remains with the ability to condense diverse temporalities. In this way, these bones are made capable of simultaneously referencing coercive acquisition circumstances and histories of scientific racism, but also present-day power asymmetries.<sup>54</sup> The more we delve into this idea, however, the more evident it becomes that the desecrations protested and decried by the claimant communities are actually accompanied by a multitude of hopes and aspirations. Interestingly, the latter have an equally multitemporal character, since they take aim not only at the healing of colonialism and racism’s wounds, or at the restoration of an ancestral order, but also at the crafting of a self-determined futurity.

The fact that the repatriables are caught up in desecrations and hopes at the same time enables them to point in multiple temporal directions. This is a capacity that we

are called to embrace analytically if we are to narrate nuanced repatriation stories that loosen the monopoly of pain and move beyond tropes of victimization. It is a matter of fact that the prevailing way of narrating the dispossession dramas that are entailed in repatriation claims tends to obscure parallel stories of resilience and pride. But how exactly does the multitemporal character of the repatriatable bones become analytically instrumental in the formation of an ethnographic lens of ‘cautious optimism’? In other words, how does it allow us to depict the contemporary social dramas of reparative justice in a more symmetrical and less patronizing way?

The recognition of the repatriatable human remains’ discrepancy from linear or progressive sequential understandings of time brings us back to Alfred Gell’s theory of art and the inspiring way in which he mobilized temporality in his work. Indeed, this dimension of his work is probably one of the most essential elements that Gell’s relational perspective could introduce to the theorization of the repatriatable human remains. More precisely, while the transformation of human remains into the ambiguous kind of material culture of the ‘repatriatables’ is premised on the multitemporal status they come to acquire, Gell’s theory of art prompts us to delve deeper into this status and explore the dynamic social tissues that bear and sustain the ephemeral resurfacing of the bones at the center of public attention. This realization stems from the fact that a repatriation story is activated and a repatriatable (mortal remain) is rendered socially alive through the nexus of the relations that are created around the impending or desired reunion of this collection item with its ancestral home and present-day descendants. This observation is reminiscent of Gell’s radical view that an art object is but a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, then, ancestral remains or other collection items that are caught up in processes of repatriation can be theorized as ‘repatriatables’ for as long as they are found at the center of attention with regard to a potential change in their fates.

As has been discussed in this section, when a bone (or other collection item) is recognized as ‘repatriatable,’ a transitional moment begins in its biography and it starts to oscillate between its actual sojourn in the repositories of its holding institution and its potential return to its place of origin. In so doing, it appears — perhaps more than ever before in its museum career — to be trapped in a state of limbo or liminality. Quite paradoxically though, it is this state of inbetweenness and indeterminacy that prompts a nexus of social relations to be created around the repatriatable: provenance

research projects and initiatives, repatriation claims and campaigns, but also postcolonial movements and, often, considerable social media buzz. It follows, then, that the liminality of a repatriatable museum item is not to be confused with social passivity, since it does not prevent it from participating in a multitude of relationships. In this sense, the repatriatable becomes a “social condenser”<sup>56</sup>: it is endowed with desecrations and offenses, as well as hopes and aspirations, accumulating a multitude of meanings. The result is that it comes to mediate social agencies that stem from both past and present, while also retaining the immanent potential of the future.

As ambiguous entities of multiple, intertwined and interrelated temporalities, the repatriatable human remains become reminders of two of the most fundamental aspects of the contemporary social experience: first, that we are all descendants, in the sense that we all have ancestors who, in different ways and extents, exert influence over our lives, and secondly, that we live in the aftermath of a long period of colonial exploitation and truculent imperialism on the part of the West. The goal of an anthropology of repatriation, then, is neither to deliver a passepartout definition of the repatriatables nor to analyze them independently from the ephemeral and/or prominent social positions they have come to occupy. As a matter of fact, rather than an abstract and novel classification that would efface the collection item’s character, the ‘repatriatable’ becomes anthropologically productive precisely for its capacity to capture a condensed — though disorderly and multitemporal — appearance of the item’s social becomings, and not necessarily of the item itself.

### **10\_In Lieu of a Conclusion, or the Anthropology of Repatriation as a Postcolonial ‘Theory of Obligation’ in Mauss’ Footsteps**

This paper has attempted to pave potential anthropological pathways for the theorization of international repatriations of museum-held human remains from Europe back to their communities of origin overseas. More specifically, its core claim is that the reclaimed museum-held human remains are, like the diverse living actors that engage with them (either today or in the past), ‘dividual’: that is, their personhood constitutes the sum of a many-faceted array of relationships, some of which could even remain unknown to the parties involved in any given relationship of these items.

In the absence of binding legislative regulations, international repatriations occur on a semi-voluntary, semi-obligatory basis that could become analytically reminiscent of the mechanisms of the gift that Marcel Mauss famously described in his essay

“The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies.”<sup>57</sup> Insightfully unlocking some of the social puzzles of obligation, Mauss’ focus lay on what he identified as ‘the gift.’ Like many anthropologists of his time, he engaged with the so-called primitive or early societies that seem to be without law but are not without obligation. Crucially, when viewed through a Maussian lens, the contemporary postcolonial dramas seem to attest to the important realization that obligation does not necessarily mean legal obligation. As a matter of fact, repatriation processes incorporate both the element of the free gesture without any prospect of return, as well as that of the advantage, which in terms of power relations stems from a somewhat obligatory gratitude on the part of the recipient. But would this mean then, that processes of repatriation constitute Melanesian acts of reciprocity and repatriable human remains (or other collection items) contemporary Maussian gifts?

Rather than trying to prove a complete affinity between the Maussian gift and the protagonists (which, for this paper, are the repatriable human remains) of the social drama of repatriation, it would be more insightful to draw on readings of Mauss that have not sought to undo the ambiguity of the gift but rather to understand it and embrace it.<sup>58</sup> To this direction, through his insightful article on exchange rituals in Kabylia, the French anthropologist René Maunier,<sup>59</sup> has tested ethnographically and mobilized conceptually the inherent ambivalence of the gift, focusing on the notion of ritual exchange. Maunier’s study became an insightful first step in the posterity of “The Gift,” since it revealed a series of paradoxes that will, interestingly, be re-encountered in the contemporary public dramas of museum repatriations: namely, the fact that the gift (or the repatriable) precedes barter or negotiations, and that its free nature has been fictitious the whole time, playing the role of a pawn in the service of social peace, and endorsing alliances between groups.

Nevertheless, the more vigorously we take up the task of identifying the repatriated ancestral human remains as contemporary Maussian gifts, the more we risk reproducing hurtful insults and succumbing to a voluntary blindness toward unbridgeable colonial and neocolonial asymmetries of power which would definitely leave no room for reciprocity or Maussian solidarity tales. Instead, I propose, a more sensible analytical choice would be to follow Alfred Gell, who spoke of art objects without ever defining what they are, and thereby to similarly eschew the obligation of defining the repatriable human remains in terms other than the unique and ephemeral

nexus that unfold around them until their return. So, if the Maussian gift and the repatriatable human remains (or other collection items) could ever be understood as communicating vessels, this would be to the extent that they share an agential sort of ambiguity: an ambiguity able to exert trickstery effects on those getting involved with them, and to demand the adoption of creative lenses by those narrating their multiple social appearances (or at least some of them).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout the last few months, the Black Lives Matter movement that followed the death of George Floyd, brought to the fore debates on the colonial memorials in the cities of the Global North in a way perhaps more tensely laden than even before in the last few years. On June 7, 2020, the statue of Edward Colston — a high official of the Royal African Company who actively contributed to the enslavement and death of thousands of Africans — was toppled in a spectacular manner, drowned in the harbor near Bristol, UK. A couple of days later in the US, the statue of Christopher Columbus met a similar fate, being beheaded and tossed into a lake in Virginia. On the Fourth of July, another statue was toppled and drowned in the Baltimore Inner Harbor. Such incidents are not mere corollaries of the upheavals around racial justice that recently spread in cities across the US and around the world: they mark an important return of material culture to the center of debates around memory culture, especially with regard to colonialism and issues of race and racism. See, for instance, Magdalena Buchczyk and Duane Jethro, “Statues Can’t Swim: Heritage Forms Washed Away in Decolonial Currents,” Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage, July 07, 2020, accessed July 12, 2021, <<https://www.carmah.berlin/reflections/statues-cant-swim/>>. Crucially, it is in the same turbulent waters in which the statues of colonial masters have been lately plunged that the museum-held human remains with which this paper is concerned are resurfacing, together with other sensitive museum items reclaimed by their communities of origin.
- <sup>2</sup> Philipp Schorch, “Sensitive Heritage: Ethnographic Museums, Provenance Research, and the Potentialities of Restitutions,” *Museum and Society* 18, no. 1 (2020): 1–5, here: 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Larissa Förster, “The Face of Genocide: Returning Human Remains from German Institutions to Namibia,” in *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Repatriation*, eds. Cressida Fforde, C. Timothy McKeown, and Honor Keeler (New York: Routledge, 2020), 101–27, here: 118.
- <sup>4</sup> Margaret Werry, “Repatriation, Rights and the Political Lives of the Dead,” in *In the Balance: Indigeneity, Performance, Globalization*, eds. Helen Gilbert, J.D. Phillipson, and Michelle H. Raheja (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 83–104.
- <sup>5</sup> Laura Peers, “The Magic of Bureaucracy: Repatriation as Ceremony,” *Museum Worlds* 5, no. 1 (2017): 9–21.
- <sup>6</sup> Laura Peers reports on the UK’s museological landscape and remarks that a particularly common phrase with regard to the idea of deaccessioning collection items and collaborating with source communities is: ‘But won’t *they* want it all back?’ This question is not only revealing of the social and political distance arising between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ as a result of the institutionalization of the profound distrust of ‘them.’ See Laura Peers, “On the Treatment of Dead Enemies: Indigenous Human Remains in Britain in the Early Twenty-First Century,” in *Social Bodies*, eds. Helen Lambert and Maryon McDonald (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 77–99, here: 90. I may add that

- this question also shows the dissolution of the boundaries between different kinds of collection items into an indeterminate volume of objects that is suddenly and indiscriminately placed in a state of exigency for fear of its repatriation.
- <sup>7</sup> Bénédicte Savoy, “Die Zukunft des Kulturbesitzes,” in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 12, 2018, accessed July 15, 2021, <<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst-und-architektur/macron-fordert-endgueltige-restitutionen-des-afrikanisches-erbes-an-afrika-15388474-p2.html>>.
- <sup>8</sup> Doreen Carvajal, “Museums Confront the Skeletons in their Closets,” in *New York Times*, May 24, 2013, accessed July 15, 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/25/arts/design/museums-move-to-return-human-remains-to-indigenous-peoples.html>>.
- <sup>9</sup> Martin Skrydstrup, “What Might an Anthropology of Cultural Property Look Like?,” in *The Long Way Home: The Meaning and Values of Repatriation*, eds. Paul Turnbull and Michael Pickering (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 59–81, here: 69.
- <sup>10</sup> Maureen Matthews, *Naamiwan’s Drum: The Story of a Contested Repatriation of Anishinaabe Artefacts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 136.
- <sup>11</sup> Laura Peers, “On the Treatment of Dead Enemies: Indigenous Human Remains in Britain in the Early Twenty-First Century,” in *Social Bodies*, eds. Helen Lambert and Maryon McDonald (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 77–99, here: 85.
- <sup>12</sup> Rose Marie San Juan, “The Turn of the Skull: Andreas Vesalius and the Early Modern Memento Mori,” *Art History* 35, no. 5 (2012): 958–75, here: 961. The ambiguous and indeterminate nature of the dead body is acknowledged by a promising body of literature. More precisely, in the special issue that was published by the *Journal of Material Culture* in 2010, Cara Krmptich, Joost Fontein and John Harris tackled the human remains’ emotive materiality and affective presence in order to argue that they should be seen as “active materials encountered and viscerally engaged with and responded to, as well as materializing evidence of human lives and relationships past and present.” Cara Krmptich, Joost Fontein, and John Harries, “The Substance of Bones: The Emotive Materiality and Affective Presence of Human Remains,” in *Journal of Material Culture* 15, no. 4 (2010): 371–384, here: 372. Along a similar line of thought, Howard Williams studied Anglo-Saxon cremation rites and showed that the dead body is far from a static and inert substance that is “manipulated and disposed of by mourners to serve their sociopolitical ends.” Rather, as Williams proposed drawing on Alfred Gell’s theory of agency, the corporal presence of the dead can affect the experiences, actions and social networks of the living. Howard Williams, “Death Warmed Up,” *Journal of Material Culture* 9 (2004): 263–291, here: 265. Another insightful study that debunked the view that the dead body is neutral was offered by Craig Young and Duncan Light, who discussed the corpse of Dr Petru Groza for its political symbolism and the role it came to play in an intricate network of representations, memories and embodied performances. See Craig Young and Duncan Light, “Corpses, Dead Body Politics and Agency in Human Geography: Following the Corpse of Dr Petru Groza,” in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (2013): 135–148, here: 143. Paola Filippucci et al. have also made an important contribution, suggesting that what renders “human remains different from, and yet exemplary of, other things is their resistance to processes of ‘purification’ and stabilization.” Paola Filippucci, John Harries, Joost Fontein, and Cara Krmptich, “Encountering the Past: Unearthing Remnants of Humans in Archaeology and Anthropology,” in *Archaeology and Anthropology: Past, Present and Future*, ed. David Shankland (London: Berg 2012), 197–218, here: 211.
- <sup>13</sup> Frances Larson, *Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found* (London: Granta, 2014), 9.

- <sup>14</sup> At this point I am referring to Marilyn Strathern's influential book *The Gender of the Gift*, which, published in 1988, polemically refused the dichotomies of persons/things and subjects/objects in Melanesia, as well as the — ten years later published — theory of art by Alfred Gell. See Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Deeply influenced by Strathern's work, Gell made the equally groundbreaking proposition that art was not to be found in beauty but in efficacy, and that an art object is an agent intended to change the world. See Gell, *Art and Agency*, 6. To a great extent, the analytical lens that is mobilized throughout this article is based on an amalgam of ideas that these two classical readings have gifted to the world of anthropology.
- <sup>15</sup> Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*, 12–13.
- <sup>16</sup> Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*, 13.
- <sup>17</sup> See Paul Turnbull, "Collecting and Colonial Violence," in *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Repatriation*, eds. Cressida Fforde, C. Timothy McKeown, and Honor Keeler (New York: Routledge, 2020), 452–68, here: 465.
- <sup>18</sup> Inger Sjørsløv has succinctly pointed out that from many Indigenous peoples' point of view, the term that would more adequately frame the return of cultural property would not be re-patriation but rather re-matriation, since the latter allows us to reimagine the process of the return of any lost heritage as a journey of reintegration into the *motherland*. See Inger Sjørsløv, "Relations in Times of Global Exchange: The Challenges of Repatriation and the Intangible Cultural Heritage," in *UTIMUT: Past Heritage — Future Partnerships: Discussions on Repatriation in the 21st Century*, eds. Mille Gabriel and Jens Dahl (Copenhagen: Indigenous Working Group for Indigenous Affairs 2008): 168–178, here: 168–69. Meaningfully diverging from its patriarchal counterpart, the notion of rematriation reactivates the — recurring among Indigenous peoples — holistic perspective that sees the land as the 'mother' on whom survival depends. See also Andreas Winkelmann, "Repatriations of Human Remains from Germany — 1911 to 2019," in *Museum and Society* 18, no. 1 (2020): 40–51, here: 40.
- <sup>19</sup> As Katharina Schramm has succinctly pointed out, when human remains enter the peculiar setting of repatriation, they "are never fully 'either (specimens)/or (ancestors),' nor do they simply speak for themselves." Katharina Schramm, "Claims of Descent: Race and Science in Contemporary South Africa," in *Vienna Working Papers in Ethnography* 3, (2014): 1–25, here: 17.
- <sup>20</sup> For a further contribution to the discipline of archaeology that has tackled the ambivalent and relational identity of the human remains showing that they are both objects and subjects at the same time, see Mary Leighton, "Personifying Objects/Objectifying people: Handling Questions of Mortality and Materiality through the Archaeological Body," in *Ethnos*, 75, no. 1 (2010): 78–101.
- <sup>21</sup> Joanna Sofaer, *The Body as Material Culture: A Theoretical Osteoarchaeology* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 31.
- <sup>22</sup> In her 2006 book, *The Body as Material Culture*, Sofaer employs the notion of material culture to show that, when examining archaeological remains, keeping a focus on the material should not imply dismissing the cultural. Interestingly, in advocating not separating the material from the cultural, Sofaer makes a significant methodological contribution, as she calls for the union of osteoarchaeology's focus on the skeletons' study with (material-culture-based) interpretative archaeology's conceptualization of human bodies as socially constructed and historically varying. See Sofaer, *The Body as Material Culture*. Crucially though, Sofaer's proposal to study the dead body as material culture should not be seen as definitional: in other words, it is an approach that leaves space for acknowledging that the dead body (though theorized as material culture) may still elicit

- emotional responses that are quite unlike those triggered by other, nonhuman, bones, or other material culture. Cf. Joost Fontein, “The Politics of the Dead: Living Heritage, Bones and Commemoration in Zimbabwe,” in *ASAonline* 1/2, (2009): 22–23.
- <sup>23</sup> Ann M. Kakaliouras, “An Anthropology of Repatriation: Contemporary Physical Anthropological and Native American Ontologies of Practice,” in *Current Anthropology* 53, no. S5 (2012): 210–221.
- <sup>24</sup> Kakaliouras, “An Anthropology of Repatriation.”
- <sup>25</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- <sup>26</sup> Kakaliouras, “An Anthropology of Repatriation,” 215.
- <sup>27</sup> Kakaliouras, “An Anthropology of Repatriation,” 214.
- <sup>28</sup> Personhood can be productively described as relational. Drawing on Strathern’s notions of partibility and dividuality, I try to expand their applicability for the contemporary postcolonial repatriation dramas, moving beyond the gendered relations and the specifics of Melanesia that Strathern considered with her 1988 book *The Gender of the Gift*. Considering the repatriatable human remains as ‘partible’ or ‘dividual’ beings (in other words, as persons) can indeed productively draw our attention to these bones’ social unearthing through relationships: in other words, to the fact that, through their interaction with other analogously constituted persons, the ‘repatriatables’ accrue their constitutive multiple parts, and become social personas.
- <sup>29</sup> Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*.
- <sup>30</sup> Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*, 145.
- <sup>31</sup> Marilyn Strathern, “Social Property: An Interdisciplinary Experiment,” in *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 27, no. 1 (2004): 23–50.
- <sup>32</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 250. The ways in which Fanon mobilizes the concepts of humanity and personhood have been particularly insightful in this paper’s theorization of the phenomenon of the return of human bones.
- <sup>33</sup> Developments like the acceptance of an international definition of the cephalic index, the localization of functions of the brain, or the anthropometric measurements of sensory and motor functions have been key in that era’s biologization of anthropology. See Douglas Lorimer, “Theoretical Racism in Late-Victorian Anthropology 1870–1900,” in *Victorian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1988): 405–430. Historians of science have, as a matter of fact, narrated how millions of peoples had their heads and limbs measured in the name of racial science, but even how single skulls would be measured hundreds of times. For studies of 19th and early 20th century scientific cultures of bone collecting see Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America’s Unburied Dead* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010). See also Megan J. Highet, “Body Snatching & Grave Robbing: Bodies for Science,” in *History and Anthropology* 16, no. 4 (2005): 415–440. An insightful study is also offered by Ricardo Roque, “Stories, Skulls and Colonial Collections,” in *Configurations* 19, no. 1 (2011): 1–23.
- <sup>34</sup> In her classic study, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800–1960*, Nancy Stepan showed that the typological orientation that scientists brought to their studies of race was premised on mechanisms of abstraction that did a tremendous disservice to human variation and experience. Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), xviii.
- <sup>35</sup> Helen MacDonald, *Human Remains: Dissection and its Histories* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 96.

- 36 Stepan, *Idea of Race in Science*, xix.
- 37 Stepan, *Idea of Race in Science*, xv.
- 38 Tiffany A. Tung, “Agency, ‘Til Death Do Us Part? Inquiring about the Agency of Dead Bodies from the Ancient Andes,” in *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 24, no. 3 (2014): 437–452.
- 39 Megan J. Highet, “Body Snatching & Grave Robbing: Bodies for Science,” in *History and Anthropology* 16, no. 4 (2005): 415–440, here: 417.
- 40 Turnbull, “Collecting and Colonial Violence,” 461.
- 41 Paul Turnbull, *Science, Museums, and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 31.
- 42 Jean-François Véran, “Old Bones, New Powers,” in *Current Anthropology* 53, no. S5 (2012): 246–255, here: 247.
- 43 Donna Spalding Andréolle and Susanne Berthier Foglar, “Science and the American Empire: The American School of Anthropology and the Justification of Expansionism,” in *Science and Empire in the Nineteenth Century: A Journey of Imperial Conquest and Scientific Progress*, eds. Catherine Delmas, Christine Vandamme, and Donna Spalding Andréolle (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 83–98, here: 79.
- 44 “What the Pienaar Homecoming Means,” City Press, accessed July 19, 2021, <<https://www.news24.com/news24/Archives/City-Press/What-the-Pienaar-homecoming-means-20150429>>.
- 45 Ciraj Rassool, “Human Remains, the Disciplines of the Dead, and the South African Memorial Complex,” in *The Politics of Heritage in Africa: Economies, Histories, and Infrastructures*, eds. Derek R. Peterson, Kodzo Gavua, and Ciraj Rassool (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 133–156, here: 155.
- 46 “The Free State of Saxony Returns Human Remains to Hawai’i,” Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, accessed July 19, 2021, <<https://www.skd.museum/en/besucherservice/press/2017/the-free-state-of-saxony-returns-human-remains-to-hawaii/>>.
- 47 Laura Peers, “The Magic of Bureaucracy: Repatriation as Ceremony,” in *Museum Worlds* 5, no. 1 (2017): 9–21.
- 48 Peers, “The Magic of Bureaucracy,” 16.
- 49 Marilyn Strathern, “Losing (Out on) Intellectual Resources,” in *Law, Anthropology, and the Constitution of the Social: Making Persons and Things*, eds. Allain Pottage and Martha Mundy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 201–233, here: 216. (Cf. note 46).
- 50 Unpacking what she coined as the plural constitution of social agents, Strathern argued that a person is a compound dividual to be considered as composed of several parts acquired from other persons. See Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*, 275.
- 51 Maureen Matthews and Roger Roulette, “‘Are all Stones Alive?’ Anthropological and Anishinaabe Approaches to Personhood,” in *Rethinking Relations and Animism: Personhood and Materiality*, eds. Miguel Astor-Aguilera and Graham Harvey (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2018), 109–142.
- 52 Maureen Matthews, *Naamiwan’s Drum: The Story of a Contested Repatriation of Anishinaabe Artefacts*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 136.
- 53 Marilyn Yalom, *The American Resting Place: Four Hundred Years of History through our Cemeteries and Burial Grounds* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 236.

- <sup>54</sup> Drawing on Henri Lefebvre, the repatriable bones can be theorized for their capacity to embody “transcendence” with regard to time itself. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 222.
- <sup>55</sup> Gell, *Art and Agency*, 7.
- <sup>56</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.
- <sup>57</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967 [1924]).
- <sup>58</sup> Alain Guery, “The Unbearable Ambiguity of the Gift\*,” trans. Katharine Throssell in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 68, no. 3 (2013): 821–837.
- <sup>59</sup> René Maunier, *Recherches sur les échanges rituels en Afrique du Nord* (Saint-Denis: Éditions Bouchene, 1998 [1927]).