



Objections to Repatriation

Objections to repatriation - Audio

Nigel Warburton

Tiffany Jenkins is a cultural sociologist. She has written a book criticising the willingness of museums to return body parts. I began by asking her why she thinks some communities and countries are so keen to see their repatriation.

Tiffany Jenkins

I think body parts have become a vehicle with which different community groups can make claims or express interest. They have a particular saliency, a particular poignancy, that they can use to make claims about their present-day living conditions, about making reparations for past colonisations, for all sorts of different demands.

Nigel Warburton

So they have symbolic importance, it's not just that for instance in a recent case with the Torres Straits Islanders, people are saying that look these souls of our ancestors will be restless until these parts are returned, but you're saying its not just a matter of that, there is some kind of symbolic importance too.

Tiffany Jenkins

I think human remains always have the potential to be a symbolic object and if you look across history, you see different interest groups, different political leaders using human remains of either named individuals or communities to make political points and you can see that happening today. There are questions as to why is this happening today with these particular groups and which need to be answered, so for example it wasn't something that people use to campaign for they now do and I am interested in why.

Nigel Warburton

So why are they doing it now?

Tiffany Jenkins

I think there are two reasons. First is that community groups have started to ask for very different things, so thirty years ago they would've asked for land rights, they would've asked for material provision and political equality, now they ask for cultural recognition of their identity; that's quite a big shift. I also think the body has acquired a particular importance

today for our identity with the collapse of religion, the family, broader social and political narratives, the body has become a really interesting and salient way in which people can express themselves and make claims. The issue of repatriation is quite a recent development. It really began in the late 1970s, early 1980s and you have to ask why. I think there are two really important reasons. One is what's happened to the demands of community groups so initially they would've asked for material provision, political equality, that's shifted in the late 70s, early 80s to more cultural recognition for demands for repatriation of objects and human remains. You also have a shift within the museum community where as a hundred years ago, even fifty years ago, they were very confident, they knew exactly what they were doing, their purpose was to develop and disseminate knowledge, to research these human remains or research communities in which they came from, and tell us about it. They are no longer confident about that so they are actually in many cases keen to repatriate human remains to community group because they feel that the institution in the past has wronged them.

Nigel Warburton

If we take a particular case, the Torres Straits Islanders have recently made claims on objects, body parts that were in the Natural History Museum in London and successfully had those repatriated. Now it's complex in that kind of case because there are questions about how the parts were required, whether they were legally acquired or looted. There are also questions about why people should repatriate, is it somehow making amends for past wrongdoing in terms of imperialism. Or is it perhaps having reverence for somebody else's religious beliefs about the importance of the integrity of the body and the particular place where the burial took place. What do you think is going on in a case like that?

Tiffany Jenkins

I think in a case like this you have a number of successful repatriations that have already occurred, that have encouraged community groups to make similar claims because they can see that they're effective and it gives them recognition. So I think really that's what happened with this community group. I think the Natural History Museum were keen to repatriate whilst there was undoubtedly divided reaction within the institution and a lot of fighting within the institution. In a way repatriation is a big, big media storm here in Britain, and I think what it does to the institution is that it gives them some sort of legitimacy by saying we are sorry, we no longer want to do this, they are saying we distance ourselves from our past which is no longer credible, so it is in a way a kind of authorising process for the institution.

Nigel Warburton

And do you agree with this repatriation of body parts?

Tiffany Jenkins

I don't agree for two reasons. One because what we can find out from those human remains tell us invaluable information about the people who lived in the Torres Straits hundreds of years ago. I think that's something that all of humanity should know and I certainly want to know and that's what these human remains can tell us. That will not happen, it's likely to not happen now, and I think that's a real loss. I also don't think that for the communities in the Torres Straits this is the answer. I think you have to look at material inequality, I think you have to look at the low life expectations and aspirations that people have and certainly giving people a few skulls isn't going to solve that.

Nigel Warburton

So are you saying that all symbolic reparation is somehow flawed intellectually?

Tiffany Jenkins

It's always driven by contemporary reasons, no matter how long ago people are talking about. I think you have to ask is it the answer and I think objects are very powerful, but often they fill a vacuum, they fill a need that is probably resolved by something else, and I think if you look at the case of repatriation in many cases the problems haven't been solved – the human remains have gone back, they've been buried and community groups are still asking for something, because in a way it's the asking that is what they feel empowers them. It's that kind of interaction between the institution and community group that this is really what this is about and the object of the human remain deserves to focus it or give a tangible kind of thing to focus on, but it is something else that is driving the focus.

Nigel Warburton

Yet many people who could withhold the return of objects feel they have a duty to make amends somehow, they feel that this is the right thing to achieve some kind of closure, emotionally on past wrongs.

Tiffany Jenkins

But I think you also have to ask really with the rise of reparations movements, which is a fairly recent phenomenon, what happened to the identity of those groups and my concern is that they are transformed into victims effectively, that that becomes how they define themselves. It's a supplicant position where they're asking for recognition, they're not striving to define themselves and I think they end up to defining themselves, if you would like, primarily by something that happened hundred of years ago where they were wronged or their ancestors were wronged and I don't think that is a very forward looking way of combating some very serious problems today. There was a political leader used to say, I think, in South Africa when people died, don't mourn, organise, i.e. let's sort out the problem, we can't revel in the past no matter how awful it is and I think what we are doing today, what community groups are doing

today and being encouraged to do so today, is revel in past wrongs and that is not very empowering.

Nigel Warburton

Do your arguments apply not just to body parts, but to art objects in museums as well?

Tiffany Jenkins

Pretty much, yes, but I do think there is a difference between an art object or rather just an object and human remains. That it's primarily a human being's response to it that's different, but I think even if you talked to the hardest scientists they will tell you that they respect the human remains; they will use a slightly different language to describe them even if it's a specimen. They will be very aware that this was once a human being, even if it's a fossil. There's something about our response to human remains that make them slightly different to objects.

Nigel Warburton

And yet museum curators seem quite happy to put Egyptian mummies on public display knowing full well that the pharaohs or whoever they were didn't want their bodies to be removed from tombs, they went all out to prevent grave robbing taking place because that would effect their chances in the after life.

Tiffany Jenkins

That's right, we know that there are many things in museums as well as Egyptian mummies that were meant to be buried forever, but I think we've made the right decision actually, that the living decide and it's our interest that decide what goes in a museum and we're not dictated to by what the Vikings wanted or what the mummies wanted because actually I feel we can respect them much more by finding more about them. I think Egyptian mummies in museums are a) incredibly popular and get people in particularly to kids, but they just tell you about another time and another place that you almost can't imagine but it just gives you that connection to the past and I think that's incredibly valuable.