

Human remains: anthropodermic bibliopegy and the appeal of the extreme in challenging the continuing external management of Indigenous remains.

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The title of this discussion paper is deliberately sensational, inviting the reader into an investigation of horrific tomes covered in human skin. In May, 2006 an article which made front page headlines in the United Kingdom, also did the rounds of the international press. It highlighted the gruesome discovery, of an anatomy text covered in the human skin of what was presumably an eighteenth-century victim of bibliological, rather than biblical, proportions (BBC News Online 2006). More interesting than the form and content of the find, which as any biblio-historian would know was common-place as a means of literally contextualising the material and often little more than a curio in intention, is the public reaction and moral lesson that the editorial and dissemination promotes—to transform and manage human remains into a simulacrum of animal skin is wrong.

Underpinning this discovery is the probably limited, largely Western trade in the human skin used to cover these books. In many of the documented cases and extant texts where provenance is established, the remains are of European skin-origin. Typically they were from the skins of prisoners, the poor, occasionally donated, or in some cases provided through the criminal activity of grave-robbing to service the needs of anatomy students. This is further evidenced by the trophy form of anatomy text that this harvested skin covered (Archer 2006). And so it becomes clear that the second layer of fear mongering employed in the title of this paper, the possibility that we Indigenous people may have been the victims of this kind of barbarism, may be overstated. The

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deliberate dehumanising of the Indigenous body, and its transformation into an object, feeds the worst fears of the liberal-minded supporter of post-colonial discourse.

When Sylvia Plath wrote of her skin being '...bright as a Nazi lampshade...' she invoked a familiar twentieth century axiom—Nazis did not treat their victims as human, but rather as objects of use. (Plath 1968, p.26) The extension of this regard, seemingly provides the natural progression to transform the victim into consumable object. Where this horrific extreme is invoked, the righteous indignation of the broad community becomes unified against 'evil'. However it may be just this requirement to harness the extreme, that assists in understanding the objectification, that has served to mitigate the cultural loss associated with the removal of Indigenous Australian remains from their burial places. The rhetoric of removal of bodies in the thousands, to British, Australian and other museums, for the purpose of study, observation and cataloguing, suggests that was this common-place. Even now, despite more than twenty years of requests by Indigenous groups for their return, they are frequently still met with an extreme failure to understand their significance, and the need for a legislation-led response.

In a March 2006 press release, The British Museum noted the passage and implications of the recent Human Tissue Act of Great Britain, acknowledging with their decision to return remains to Tasmanian Aboriginal descendants, that the Museum

...had long recognised that human remains from the modern period represent a special case raising particularly difficult issues. (The British Museum 2006)

Further, the title of the press release: 'British Museum decides to return two Tasmanian cremation ash bundles', indicates the process, rather than compulsive, was a decision that lay with the Museum itself.

Despite the more than twenty year battle for repatriation, there is still a fundamental lack of understanding by legislators and museums of repatriation requests. They seem to be viewed only as a token cultural gesture of assuagement, rather than a real understanding of cultural negotiation and necessity. A clear indicator of this can be found in the concise parameters set by the changes to the Human Tissue Act.

Two nominal figures have been imposed as when this version of the Act came into effect:

- one thousand years as a period under which the return of remains was allowed, and
- one hundred years as a period under which permission must be

sought for the public display or use of remains.

If this was a genuine hand-over of human remains of cultural significance, as requested in the documents presented by Tasmanian Aboriginal Groups over a period of nearly 20 years, then figures, such as the above that have no real currency to the value of the remains to the group, would not be applied to their return. The British Museum's press release provided a caveat towards the end that reads:

The British Museum has only a small amount of Aboriginal human remains in its collection. We estimate that there are only a further three possible Australian claims which may result from the change in legislation. If submitted each claim would be examined on an individual basis by the Museum's Trustees (The British Museum 2006).

It is unclear from this part of the statement how many Indigenous Australian remains in total are contained in the Museum. The legislation requires no such disclosure. It restricts the public exhibition of remains under a hundred years; it does not require return of these remains. It allows the return of items up to a thousand years; but does not compel it. This open statement does not indicate which groups may have an interest, and there is no means or explicit inclination to identify or provide for the return of any remains that are older than a thousand years.

The British Act allows public institutions to release bodies, wrapped up in the term 'de-accession', with the unmeasurable risk that by allowing the act of summarily returning items, there could be a threat to the ongoing scientific management of history. This de-accession could, if opened beyond the parameters set by the institution, and instead led by the grieving Indigenous communities, at a practical level diminish the culture of museology and archival management that has been so significant in the preservation of Western history and science. In the necessary act of self-preservation, it will be interesting to see how museums will respond to this call to manage their collections differently, and to allow what they have always managed as commodities, to be returned, out of reach of study and observation.

'The Meanings and Values of Repatriation', a conference on repatriation issues was held at the Centre for Cross Cultural Research, Australian National University in 2005, and was influential in providing a timely discussion within the academy. In the context of that conference, Philip Batty, Senior Curator of Anthropology and Indigenous Cultures at Museum Victoria, pondered the genuine significance of Indigenous secret, sacred objects that have been returned to the Indigenous people, as '...white Australia [obtaining] absolution for it's past treatment of Aboriginal people' (Centre for Cross-Cultural Research ANU, 2005).

With the British Act, a distinction is drawn between human remains and other secret, sacred artifacts. This distinction is necessary as the Act clearly determines the appropriate use of human tissue. However, in lieu of a formal capacity for cultural negotiations that cannot be predetermined, the Act has become one of the few mechanisms that protects both the museums and the holders of these items, and provides guidance for those Indigenous groups requesting their return.

Human lampshades, skin made leather and soap made from the victims of the Nazi Holocaust are now debunked as well-intentioned devices to politically expedite the demonizing of Nazis in a post-war environment. The extreme cruelty of the Holocaust is irrefutable, including the well-documented removal of skin for the harvesting of tattoos. Both sets of behaviours, myth and reality, clearly speak to the need to set apart the behaviour of the Holocaust as the deepest moral wrong. (Shadows of Silence, 2004)

When Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) removes and wears the face of a man to impersonate him, we are reminded that this inhabitation demonstrates a monstrous character without regard for humanity. The wearing and utilitarianising of human remains is clearly regarded differently by mainstream Western culture than the display of long-dead remains exhibited for the purposes of historical understanding: one horrific, the other scientific. In the context of the museum, both objects are a commodity and viewable, but frequently from an Indigenous perspective, they are viewed as deplorable—a cultural tragedy.

Australia has by no means been an easier repatriation battleground, or for that matter provided an easier audience for arguing cultural significance. Australia has had a long history of managing the same requests poorly without the excuse of distance—the Strehlow collection is a clear example.

Persistence in voicing concerns over unacceptable cultural practice has however effected some significant change in museological contexts. The outcry on the desecration and display of identified humans, such as Truganini's body gained currency as the general public considered the issues and the broader cultural sensitivities changed. The practice has been demonised and discontinued. Public demands, government intervention—in particular the ongoing Australian Government support of international repatriation of remains, the Australian federal and state-funded Return of Indigenous Cultural Property Program, the ongoing protection afforded by other Acts such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Act (1984)—all work in concert to establish the means of managing repatriation projects and provide protection of some cultural spaces.

The position of the United States federal government in managing repatriation has been swifter in resolution and clearer in intent, at least in legislation and action to date. The federally administered Smithsonian Institute, a major holder of Indigenous remains, have laid out a clear plan and appointed an agency of repatriation and return that is monitored and controlled on a case by case basis, while following the clear guidelines of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 (Smithsonian Institute, 2007). While NAGPRA is not without its problems—in particularly in relation to the recognition of the validity of their own internal Indigenous group's rights—it provides less rigid legislation, thus placing the charter of significance on the Indigenous group requesting the return, rather than the agency holding the remains. The US Act clearly states that it does not cover international repatriation, and clearly sees this role in a different way, deferring when an international agreement is in place—as is informally the case with Australia—that the return of remains may be negotiated, providing without didactic guidelines, arguably a stronger space for negotiation.

This discussion paper has focused on the repatriation of Indigenous remains from the United Kingdom, and in particular has highlighted a single case of return from The British Museum. However, it is important to note that in the final months of 2006, following the changes in British legislation, Michael Mansell and a delegation of Indigenous Tasmanians visited the Natural History Museum in London who failed to provide the same good faith actions of The British Museum. In Mansell's words,

The museum's position was they are still unconvinced about why Tasmanian Aborigines should have the remains of our ancestors back. They don't understand anything about the cultural and spiritual and religious obligations we have to our dead (AAP 2006).

While the onus continues to be on our people to prove the cultural significance of the return of our ancestors, we are developing models of practice in groups all over Australia. The work of the Ngarrindjeri and Larrakeyah and the ongoing work of groups like the Tasmanian delegation, will continue to lead this challenge to legislation which attempts to manage our bodies and our remains. In challenging the commodification of our bodies and our contiguous relationship with our ancestors, anthropologic museology should be regarded as horrific and culture-destroying as the anthropodermic bibliopegical extremes of Western tolerance.

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