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Repatriation in the Modern Museum World: Practical Problems Surrounding Decolonization of Collections

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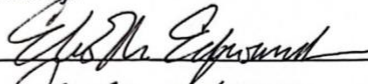

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**Repatriation in the Modern Museum World: Practical Problems Surrounding
Decolonization of Collections**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of History, Anthropology, and Classics

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Rachel Mary Sudbeck

Advised by Dr. Elise Edwards

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Abstract

Museums are home to many artifacts that allow us to learn about and understand people from around the world. However, many artifacts kept in Western (primarily North American and European) museums have origins steeped in colonial ideas of cultural superiority and collections acquired through ethically questionable means. Many institutions have been working to decolonize their collections by evaluating their objects' cultural origins and repatriating some pieces when possible. By repatriating (returning) objects of cultural patrimony as specified by laws such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), museums uphold their ethical duties and improve the quality of their collection. However, many museums have struggled to repatriate due to practical, ideological, and bureaucratic barriers. As part of my ethnographic research, including participant observation and interviews at two Indianapolis museums, I have engaged in the repatriation process and analyzed the challenges that modern museums face as they work to decolonize their collections and exhibit spaces. Through ethnographic and historical research, I have been able to highlight some of the major challenges that museums face during the repatriation process and many of the ways that they have been able to strive for successful repatriation.

Part 1: Setting the Stage

Introduction

It is cold in the archives. The lower temperatures are necessary to properly preserve items and documents, but every person who has worked in an archive is familiar with wearing a sweater to work in the summer. I may have gotten some strange looks from my roommates, but I knew that this was just part of working closely with museum collections. Sitting in a chilly office space, smelling old paper and dusty files around you is just part of the daily life of many museum collections professionals. However peaceful that may sound, registrars, archivists, curators, and other museum professionals must struggle with the ethics of collection management and usage daily. There is a large amount of scholarship surrounding deaccessioning, repatriation, and ethical concerns within museum collections. However, I have not found specific studies of an ethnographic nature about the real-time, practical problems that museums face when they are attempting to deaccession and repatriate artifacts. Through my research on and work at two Indianapolis museums, I have engaged in repatriation and other collections work to analyze the challenges that modern museums face as they work to decolonize their collections and exhibit spaces. I will document how repatriation is pursued in compliance with laws such as NAGPRA and analyze how the issues faced on an institutional level are impacted by federal laws, structural and organizational factors, and a range of opinions held by museum stakeholders about decolonization as a practice.

Over the 2023-2024 academic year, I worked directly under the collections manager and registrar of two influential museums in the Indianapolis area on repatriation projects and general collections management.¹ My work at these institutions has allowed me to experience the ins and

¹ To maintain ethical integrity and ensure the safety of all parties, all participants and their institutions will be kept anonymous.

outs of the repatriation process first-hand. As part of my participation at these institutions, I researched artifacts that had been flagged as possible candidates for repatriation and identified their uses and importance while also attempting to research the national and international laws that the museum must comply with in cases of repatriation. Throughout these experiences, I have employed ethnographic methods such as interviews with people who are involved in repatriation and participant observation to gain qualitative data on the opinions surrounding the process of repatriation. By investigating the ways that repatriation is pursued on the ground, this historical and anthropological project will show how and why collections professionals pursue repatriation despite the barriers and discourse they may face.

The Debates Surrounding Repatriation

Decolonization is a concept that is frequently discussed in museum scholarship circles and is inherently linked to repatriation. In the context of museum work, decolonization refers to “the act of reflecting, expanding, and implementing change in whose perspectives and voices the museum chooses to portray beyond the dominant cultural group, particularly white colonizers.”² While this definition encapsulates the goal of decolonization, there are a variety of opinions surrounding how decolonization should be approached. Some of the major efforts that many museums have begun to implement to decolonize have included revision of labels and addition of information, consultation with cultural groups, and including more diverse voices on museum boards and panels. While these are all great efforts to pursue, some authors have suggested that museums need to dig deeper to truly create a decolonized space.³ In the context of this research, I will be focusing on one of those ways to dig deeper; the physical removal of culturally significant objects from the museum, otherwise known as repatriation.

² “Decolonization” American Alliance of Museums, (2020).

³ Dan Hicks. *The British Museums*. (North Hampton, England: Pluto Press, 2020), 9.

Arguably marking the advent of decolonizing efforts in museums in the United States, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) passed in 1990 and recently revised in 2023 has made ethical reviews of archives and collections and the repatriation of objects extremely relevant. NAGPRA requires that museums and other federal agencies identify and make every effort to repatriate Native American and Native Hawaiian “human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony.”⁴ Despite the legal and ethical concerns, many museums have exploited loopholes in NAGPRA to keep artifacts that should be repatriated. As of 2022, about 200 institutions had failed to give back any of the Native American remains held in their collections.⁵ Many institutions will label “everything in their collections that might be subject to the law as ‘culturally unidentifiable’” giving them the right to keep the objects in their collection because provenance is unknown.⁶ When museums exploit loopholes in NAGPRA, they perpetuate unethical and abusive practices that have and continue to harm indigenous communities who have been colonized and stolen from.

The current literature points to several factors that may lead museums to be less inclined to invest in repatriation. In some cases, members of museum boards or the community have argued that museums are duty-bound to retain and “protect” items that are in their collections.⁷ Some believe museums must keep and preserve items as Native communities “will not know how to take care of items that are returned to them,” thus threatening the loss of the object and its history forever.⁸ Others claim that museums have an ethical duty to those who donate items,

⁴ Paul Hoffman. “NAGPRA.” U.S. Department of the Interior. July 28, 2005.

⁵ Graham Lee Brewer et.al. “The Repatriation Project: America’s Biggest Museums Fail to Return Native American Human Remains” ProPublica. Last Modified Jan 5, 2023

⁶ Graham Lee Brewer et.al. “The Repatriation Project: America’s Biggest Museums Fail to Return Native American Human Remains” ProPublica. Last Modified Jan 5, 2023.

⁷ Nancy Kenney. “AAMD loosens rules for museums seeking to divert income amid coronavirus crisis.” The Art Newspaper (2020).

⁸ Devon “American Indians, Anthropologists, Pothunters, and Repatriation: Ethical, Religious, and Political Differences.” American Indian Quarterly 20, no. 2 (1996), 231.

making it wrong for them to give those items away.⁹ While the general arguments for and against deaccessioning and repatriation are well known, much less is known about the actual challenges that are faced by individual museums as they work to ethically maintain their collections.

Before the mid-20th century, a museum's success was based on its ability to acquire objects and preserve them within its extensive collections. In the early days of museums (as early as the 15th century), collectors were not acquiring objects to preserve them to educate the people of a community; they were collecting to keep as many items as possible and show them to those who may be interested without a particular purpose in mind. However, as time went on, "the scope of accreditation¹⁰ has steadily broadened to consider not only the institutional care of collections but also, as importantly, the programmatic use of those collections."¹¹ Museums were less interested in acquiring objects and more interested in showing those objects in an accessible way. As museums became less focused on collecting and more focused on using their collections, their missions have shifted to a more education-based approach that leads curators to tailor exhibits to the needs and interests of the community. Stephen Weil discusses how museum success transitioned to focus more on an institution's ability to use its collections strategically to portray a specific message rather than its ability to collect and preserve. Weil describes how in the early days of museums, "accreditation was primarily concerned with how an institution cared

⁹ Nancy Kenney. "AAMD loosens rules for museums seeking to divert income amid coronavirus crisis." *The Art Newspaper* (2020).

¹⁰ In the context of this research, accreditation refers to a museum's ability to meet set of guidelines put forth by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). Museums must undergo a self and peer review process every 10 years that can take anywhere from 8-16 months. During this review period, two key questions are discussed: "How well does the museum achieve its stated mission and goals?" and "How well does the museum's performance meet standards and best practices as they are generally understood in the museum field, as appropriate to its circumstances?" These questions are very general, but the museum world can change drastically over the course of 10 years. Considering this, the questions act as guidelines and are informed by the mindsets of the professionals who are conducting the formal review of the museum. While it may seem subjective, the accreditation process has become a clear reflection of the things that make a museum valuable and successful in the modern day.

¹¹ Steven Weil. "From being about something to being for somebody: The ongoing transformation of the American museum" *Daedalus* vol. 128, no. 3 (1999), 3.

for its collection and maintained its facilities.”¹² Museums began to shift their focus away from collecting and storing objects to being places with missions that these objects had to support. Objects were no longer just things to be looked at, they were being used to create narratives that aimed to educate a wider audience on their meaning.

As museums began to consider the practical applications of their collections, more and more objects were placed in storage. Many collections officials and curators began to see their extensive collections as a burden rather than the blessing that their predecessors saw under a collection-based model. Many curators and collections officials began to parse through their collections to find items that fit their museum’s mission and found that many things they held were not valuable. Sharon Macdonald and Jennie Morgan refer to this as “the profusion struggle.” Collections have gotten so massive that curators are overwhelmed by the number of objects they have.¹³ Macdonald and Morgan express how many museum officials began to see collections that were not on display as “wasteful” and “too much-unused stuff, draining resources.”¹⁴ Museums were beginning to realize that they were too full of objects that they did not need and should not have.

Since their collections are full of objects that no longer hold relevance to their museums, curators have been restricted in their active pursuit of new objects. Many curators have hoped “to collect more from recent and contemporary everyday life but [felt] burdened by the profusion of existing collected objects and the work that these require.”¹⁵ In the early years of museums,

¹² Steven Weil. “From being about something to being for somebody: The ongoing transformation of the American museum” *Daedalus* vol. 128, no. 3 (1999), 3.

¹³ Sharon Macdonald and Jennie Morgan. “De-growing museum collections for new heritage futures.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 26 (2020).

¹⁴ Sharon Macdonald and Jennie Morgan. “De-growing museum collections for new heritage futures.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 26 (2020).

¹⁵ Sharon Macdonald and Jennie Morgan. “De-growing museum collections for new heritage futures.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 26 (2020).

curators put great effort into collecting items that they thought would be relics of lost cultures or would allow future generations of researchers to see into the past. Despite their good intentions, the “efforts of past curators to anticipate loss, however, contribute to a paradoxical situation in which curators today feel limited in their capacity to do likewise.”¹⁶ Because museums have become so saturated with items acquired in the past that do not apply to their current goals, many curators feel limited in their ability to acquire new items without sacrificing the care of others. With the implementation of NAGPRA in 1990, an additional layer was added to these evaluations as objects of cultural patrimony needed to be identified and their information sent to tribes.¹⁷ Many collections officials may have embraced this change as it allowed them to get rid of some objects that may not have been in use in their collections. Others, however, began to raise concerns about how museums would meet their missions to educate the public on cultural history.

However, when museums were legally required to participate in repatriation efforts under NAGPRA, many institutions, both in the United States and abroad, began to argue that they had a right to all of the objects in their collections. In 2002, eighteen of the world’s leading museums released the “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums” that defended their right to keep cultural objects in their possession to preserve them and educate the global public.¹⁸ This collection of museums “shares the conviction that illegal traffic in archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects must be firmly discouraged. We should, however, recognize that objects acquired in earlier times must be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values,

¹⁶ Sharon Macdonald and Jennie Morgan. “De-growing museum collections for new heritage futures.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 26 (2020).

¹⁷ Final Rule, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act Systematic Processes. 43 CFR Part 10 (2023).

¹⁸ Geraldine Kendall Adams “Does the argument that museums hold collections on behalf of the world still stand?” *Museums Association* (2020).

reflective of that earlier era.”¹⁹ While they acknowledge that some of their items may have been illegally trafficked or looted in the past, they are urging their audiences to consider past collection practices when evaluating the ethics of their possession of them.

Scholars and museum professionals alike have argued that universal museums act as a means of protection for anthropological collections and global education. One of the major arguments for universal museums asserts that all objects should be the property of the world. Instead of returning objects to their rightful owners, some believe that “nationalist cultural-property laws are not intended to protect the world’s ancient heritage. Instead, they are meant to claim that heritage as the property of the modern nation-state, important to its identity and esteem.”²⁰ Many proponents of universal museums believe that laws for repatriation are nationalistic and are more concerned with politics than the protection of objects. Since national identity is socially constructed, the nations that were stolen from do not have a clear cultural claim to the objects that were stolen from their ancestors.²¹

Another concern surrounding repatriation that is used in support of universal museums is that returning objects to their source communities puts them at risk of damage or degradation. There is an expressed concern that source communities will not have the means to preserve or care for an object, so to preserve it for future generations, the museum has a right to keep and conserve it. There have also been arguments surrounding concerns of items being stolen and consequently lost completely if all the cultural objects of one country are kept under one roof. Some believe that if museums were “to distribute that risk among many countries, as we once

¹⁹ Geraldine Kendall Adams “Does the argument that museums hold collections on behalf of the world still stand?” Museums Association (2020).

²⁰ James Cuno “Antiquity Belongs to the World.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 43 (2008), 6.

²¹ James McClellan. Review of *Cosmocharlatanism*, by James Cuno. *Oxford Art Journal* 32, no. 1 (2009), 168.

did through partage, there would be a better chance that fewer excavated antiquities would be damaged or destroyed and more of them available for sustained research.”²² A vast majority of scholars believe that objects should be protected, but some believe that their countries of origin will not be able to house and protect them properly. There is concern that the removal of objects from universal museums and return to their home countries will make them inaccessible to future generations of researchers.

Since museums are continually shifting to better serve their communities, their collection practices must change too. In the 21st century, the maintenance of ethical practices has become a constant concern for museums. Many scholars have discussed the case against universal museums in support of returning objects to their respective cultures. While the “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums” urges patrons to ignore ethical issues based on the follies of past collection practices, others have opposed that, saying that “museums need to reflect on the changing and conflicting ideas of what is considered appropriate to collect, and how the histories of museums and collecting have created the specific circumstances within which museums operate today.”²³ While museums should be aware of past collection practices regardless, museums also must consider how they function in the modern day and the message they wish to convey to their audience.

One of the most influential books written on museum ethics and repatriation is professor and curator of archeology and anthropology Dan Hick’s *The Brutish Museums*. In his book, Hicks argues that anthropological and ethnographic museums need to fundamentally change the way they operate as they often do not discuss the brutal histories surrounding some cultural

²² James Cuno “Antiquity Belongs to the World.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 43 (2008), 5.

²³ Neil G.W. Curtis. "Universal museums, museum objects and repatriation: The tangled stories of things." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (2006), 118.

objects. Many objects were stolen from their culture of origin during war or were looted from colonized countries as trophies. Some are said to hold the souls of ancestors or gods that were consequently torn away from their homes. The brutality and sadness surrounding cultural objects are often brushed aside and left undiscussed in a way that may unintentionally perpetuate a narrative of white superiority. As a result, Hicks claims that ethnographic museums function as a “method and a device for the ideology of white supremacy.”²⁴ In the case of the looting of the city of Benin, Hicks specifically points to how the narrative around the siege was purposefully misrepresented within museums as its framing “begins with a silencing of the scale of the British violence, of the loss of life of Bini and iJekri people, and the idea of punishment.”²⁵ This reframing to exclude the ugly parts of British violence against Benin shows how museums can perpetuate white supremacy and saviorism through lies of omission. Museums that depict world cultures often misrepresent the scenarios under which many of their artifacts were acquired to perpetuate these “unfinished cycles.”²⁶ By pointing out how the Benin Bronzes and other cultural objects have been acquired through questionable means and subsequently had those origins scrubbed from their context, Hicks encourages audiences to be critical of the ways that museums present objects of cultural patrimony.

Modern museums are making more of an effort to ethically manage their collections, which includes compliance with repatriation laws. Objects may be in their collections now, but that is not their proper place. Regardless of how an object came to be there in the past, “there are proper places for things, places where they have significance and power, or efficacy. What objects are, and what power they may exert over people, thus rests on their proper

²⁴ Dan Hicks. *The Brutish Museums*. (North Hampton, England: Pluto Press, 2020), 15.

²⁵ Dan Hicks. *The Brutish Museums*. (North Hampton, England: Pluto Press, 2020), 40.

²⁶ Dan Hicks. *The Brutish Museums*. (North Hampton, England: Pluto Press, 2020), 47.

emplacement.”²⁷ The setting in which an object is presented holds power over how it is interpreted. Considering this, objects are to be returned to their countries of origin, where they can be properly represented in their cultural context. In response to the argument that countries use repatriation to build false legitimacy, Mark O’Neill points out that a universal museum portrays “through its displays, in its workings and in its very existence, an ideal of how society should be.”²⁸ In reality, While objects may be used to create a narrative of nationalism in their home countries, that does not erase the fact that they are used to create a different kind of narrative in a universal museum. Having a right to an object gives a museum the right to create a narrative surrounding it. More and more museums in the modern day are considering how they can use their objects and power to give voice to those who have had objects and power taken from them in the past.

However, many curators and collections managers continue to struggle to decolonize their museums due to bureaucratic and ideological barriers. Museums are aware of the conversations surrounding decolonization and repatriation so why are they not simply jumping on the chance to make a change in their collections? Why are we not hearing about mass repatriations across the country? While it is sometimes due to resistance from collections professionals, multiple barriers make repatriation difficult. Even in a museum world where decolonization is praised and repatriation is pursued in earnest, there are fundamental issues that all collections professionals must deal with daily.

²⁷ Mark Busse. “Museums and the Things in Them Should Be Alive.” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 15, no. 2 (2008), 190.

²⁸ Mark O’Neill. “Enlightenment museums: universal or merely global?” *Museums and Society* 2, no. 3 (2004), 193.

Part 2: Repatriation: The Process, Problems, and Positive Results

While past literature can provide a background for the philosophy surrounding repatriation and decolonization, it is important to understand how people working with repatriation understand and interact with it on a day-to-day basis. Over a year, I was able to work with and talk to the people in two major Indianapolis museums who are primarily responsible for the repatriation efforts in their institutions: curators, registrars, and archivists. These museum professionals are involved in the upkeep and use of their respective museums' collections. They are the experts when it comes to any object in their collection and are responsible for knowing their whereabouts and conditions. Through interviews and participant observations, I was able to gain a better understanding of how these professionals handle repatriation, the barriers they have faced, and the ways they have paved the road to success for future generations of collections professionals.

The Repatriation Process: How

Through my work on and observation of NAGPRA-related projects, I have been able to determine a general system that the institutions I worked with follow to be as efficient as possible throughout the repatriation process. However, both institutions I worked at had slightly different processes. While I may set forth their processes here to bring light to a general process, repatriation can look different at every institution.

The process begins with people and research. At Institution 1 I studied, they were fortunate enough to have a grant that allotted time and money to repatriation specifically. Kelly, a curator, and Jane, a collections manager, had the most in-depth knowledge about the repatriation process as they were both working directly with the grant. When I talked to Kelly,

she smiled and nodded quickly as I asked about how they started the repatriation process. “With our grant, we were able to bring on several consultants to help us do this process. So that has been a huge help to getting that expert opinion from those indigenous groups.”²⁹ Consultation is a key tool when it comes to repatriation that involves bringing in an expert on Native American culture or a tribal representative to identify objects that may be subject to repatriation. During my time at these institutions, I never actively interacted with a consultant as they are often only escorted by a few staff members. However, I was able to attend debrief sessions where the staff members who were able to attend the consultation gave an overview of what happened during the meeting.

Consultations, like most things during repatriation, can come in a few different forms. When talking to Mary at my second site, I asked her how they go about having consultants identify objects. “Are there usually items you pick out to show them or do they just walk through the entire collection?” It seemed to me it would take a long time for them to go row by row to identify objects. She huffed a breath when I said that and tilted her hand left and right “It can go a few ways.” She looked towards the ceiling briefly, then back to me:

With our eventual visit from the Northern Arapaho, we will specifically be showing them pieces that either directly come from the Arapaho or come from the greater Great Plains area. But with the consultant that we've been working with so far, because she has such a wide experience with NAGPRA and has many, many connections with different indigenous communities, she just kind of looks at everything. We just open up a cabinet and she goes through shelf by shelf.³⁰

Local consultants, like the one that the second site has worked with consistently, can go through shelf by shelf because they have more time with the collection. They build connections with staff and become a go-to resource for identification issues. Tribal representatives have more limited

²⁹ Kelly (curator), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 22nd, 2023.

³⁰ Mary (curatorial assistant), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 9th, 2024.

time and are therefore usually shown objects that have been previously identified as possible items for repatriation. Regardless, consultants are extremely important in identifying objects that should be further investigated for repatriation purposes. They can identify objects based on their knowledge that can then be supported by further provenance research or tribal claims. In either case, a collections manager or curator will usually have an item they have identified as Native American, African, etc. that they know should be examined for repatriation purposes. Once they have one object, they can attempt to contact consultants and bring them in as soon as every one is available. This means that consultations can happen both extremely frequently or rarely based on the availability of time and resources. Consultations can be a strong start to determining who an object should go back to, but there are still more steps needed to make a successful repatriation.

Once an object has been identified as an object of cultural patrimony, NAGPRA requires that collection officials notify tribes of their existence in the collection.³¹ Institutions will often either email a tribe (if possible) or send them a letter informing them of the object they have in their collection.³² During my interviews, I asked how source communities are involved in the process of repatriation. As part of my work at my second site, I digitized hundreds of letters that the institution had sent to tribes in 1993. When NAGPRA was enacted in 1990, it mandated that all tribes be notified of objects that could be subject to repatriation by 1995.³³ These letters typically included very little specific information. The letters would simply state that they would like to notify the tribe that there are objects that may be subject to NAGPRA associated with their tribe in the collection. No pictures or specific object titles were included. However, in 1995,

³¹ Final Rule, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act Systematic Processes. 43 CFR Part 10 (2023).

³² Kelly (curator), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 22nd, 2023.

³³ Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation. 25 USC Ch. 32 (1990): 4.

the institution sent a summary of certain “cultural areas” that included all of the objects that could belong to tribes in that area. These lists were not very specific as they, again did not include pictures, and a cultural area could be as generally defined as the “Great Plains Cultural Area” or “Alaska Cultural Area.” However, tribes could reply to request more information about a specific object on the list or set up a meeting with the collections manager. Much like bringing in a consultant, simply notifying a wide range of tribes can begin to move the process forward. When I asked Walt, a curator, how tribes are involved in repatriation and how they are contacted, he didn’t even skip a beat before he replied.

We just sort of do a blanket. Everybody within this nation, all the bands here's what we have. We think it's your nation's. Could you help us identify it? We think it's Ojibwe. And we have a member of that nation come in and say, no it's actually not, it's this.³⁴

By casting a wide net and notifying as many tribes as possible, it is more likely that the institution will receive a response that will allow them to move forward. Involving tribes will lead to a progression in the process no matter what. Whether they claim the object as theirs or reject it and supply a different direction, the collections staff can be sure that they are taking a step in the right direction to get the object back to its rightful owner.

While contacting and involving tribes is essential, there is also a massive amount of research that must be done to verify or identify objects. Multiple kinds of research need to be done throughout the entire process. When I spoke to Mary, a curatorial assistant at Institution 2, she told me about the role that she has played in the repatriation process in the past. Institution 2 had completed a large repatriation, so she specifically referenced the work she did during that time:

My role specifically in that was to do all of the accession research.... That work looks like going through our card catalog, going through our temporary receipt books, going

³⁴ Walt (curator), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 21st, 2023.

through historical files or files, donor files, dealer files, making sure that everything has been cataloged appropriately, and just polishing up records.³⁵ Considering how many sources need to be consulted, accession research can take months or even years to complete. Accession research requires someone with access to their archives to go into historical files, donor files, lender files, and any other possible associated files to trace a clear line from where the object originated from to how it arrived at their institution. In my work on accession research at Institution 1, I also did general searches on an object's name and place of origin to determine if it could have been part of a massive looting event. In many cases, there may be incomplete records due to loss or records that span multiple institutions and may be hard to track down.

In one case that I worked on at Institution 1, one of the curators and I had both done thorough research on an object but hit a dead end as there was a massive gap in its movement history. Although it originated from Hawaii, it was donated to a university in Indiana and then gifted to Institution 1. We emailed and called around to the university that had owned it before Institution 1, but they had no information on how it came to be in the possession of the deceased donor. In these types of situations, repatriation becomes even more difficult. If the museum cannot establish where it was bought or stolen from, the object may remain stationary until a clear identification can be made. While it is not impossible to repatriate an object with this big of an information gap, collections managers like Jane would prefer to have a complete history so they can repatriate it to the proper people.

Once an object has been identified, whether through research or consultation, the object must go through a few more formal processes to be returned to its source community. Jane, the collections manager at Institution 1, and Jade, the registrar heading NAGPRA investigations at

³⁵ Mary (curatorial assistant), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 9th, 2024.

Institution 2, gave me the most in-depth explanations of the process after an object has been claimed. Although repatriation is a separate process, the object must still be formally deaccessioned (removed) from the collection, something that must be approved by the museum board. When she began talking about this process Jade let out a long breath, smiling “Luckily, the committee is very open to what we have to say.”³⁶ She had been walking me through the entire process and took a deep breath after that sentence. Having the support of your institution is essential, something that some collections professionals may not have the luxury of experiencing. Once the board agrees and the museum relinquishes legal title to the object, it can be freely transferred to another party.

As part of the final steps of repatriation, the object will be posted to the Federal Register. All museums and federal institutions must publish their inventories and intents to repatriate on the NAGPRA website.³⁷ Published summaries allow tribes to do research on objects and make claims before an institution sends a formal notification. Objects that are being actively repatriated are published on the federal register and remain there for 30 days where they can be contested by another tribe if they think they have a more legitimate claim.³⁸ This publication on the federal register is a major part of why having complete provenance can help the object move more quickly through the repatriation process. It is essential to build a strong case for how an object came to be in your institution's collection so it is clear where an object should be returned. Any contests will require the museum and tribe to go back into their files and complete another thorough investigation into the object. After the object successfully spends 30 days on the

³⁶ Jade (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 5th, 2024.

³⁷ <https://grantsdev.cr.nps.gov/NagpraPublic/Home/Notice>

³⁸ Mary (curatorial assistant), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 9th, 2024.

register with no contests, preparations can be made to ship or otherwise transport the object to its place of origin.

The repatriation process can take years to complete, showing how much time and effort goes into it. Each stage of the process can take months or even years depending on how much information or resources are available. Tribes and museum staff dedicate years of their time to getting these objects back to their places of origin and should be recognized for their effort.

The Repatriation Process: Why

Repatriation is one of the greatest tools museums can leverage as they attempt to decolonize. All the collections professionals I talked to discussed why they think repatriation is important both as a collections practice and as an ethical tool. They specifically discussed some of the major reasons why museums should take repatriation seriously due to legal, moral, and ethical issues.

Many of the museum professionals I spoke with said repatriation was important because the objects do not belong to them. “Once stolen, always stolen” was a phrase I heard on more than one occasion.³⁹ Under federal law, museums and federal organizations hold no claim to ownership over an object of cultural patrimony. According to the original publication of

NAGPRA:

Ownership shall be given to lineal descendants of the Native Americans whose remains are found, the tribe on whose land such objects were found, the tribe that has the closest cultural affiliation with the remains, or, for culturally unaffiliated objects, the tribe recognized as occupying the area aboriginally.⁴⁰

³⁹ Mary (curatorial assistant), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 9th, 2024.

⁴⁰ Weiss, Elizabeth, and James W. Springer. “NAGPRA and Beyond: REPATRIATION AND RELATED LAWS IN THE UNITED STATES.” In *Repatriation and Erasing the Past*, 1st ed., 125–54.

Under NAGPRA, objects of cultural patrimony cannot legally be in the possession of any museum or federal organization. Ultimately, any object that holds cultural significance will always be under the legal ownership of its place of origin, no matter how long it has been. Objects that were stolen from their country of origin are also included in NAGPRA and should not legally be a part of a museum's collection.⁴¹ This relates back to the phrase "once stolen, always stolen" and amplifies the importance of provenance. If it is discovered that an object was stolen from its place of origin, that places it as a higher priority, especially if it came from outside of the U.S. Native American repatriations are certainly not easy, but repatriation to anywhere outside of the U.S. can be even more complicated as there are no mandatory international repatriation laws. This lack of legislation means that many countries that are being repatriated will be without support and will likely not have the funding to support a large repatriation.

Regardless of the laws that are explicitly stated, museums still hold a moral obligation to protect objects that have been flagged as stolen, sacred, or culturally significant under NAGPRA. Beyond the legal issues, for many collections professionals, it is "about the respect for other people. It's their property and their ancestors... that's why repatriation is important because it's not ours."⁴² When I talked to Kelly, she nodded as she spoke about the moral obligations that museums have. Sometimes "we don't even know [how they got here] but they're here and they're not ours. And they need to be returned. It's so important that we are doing this work."⁴³ A stolen object may never have a complete provenance record, but that does not give a museum

⁴¹ Weiss, Elizabeth, and James W. Springer. "NAGPRA and Beyond: REPATRIATION AND RELATED LAWS IN THE UNITED STATES." In *Repatriation and Erasing the Past*, 1st ed., 125–54.

⁴² Julie (archivist), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 20th, 2023

⁴³ Kelly (curator), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 22nd, 2023.

permission to do with it as they please. Morally, they still must protect and care for that sacred object to the best of their ability until it can be returned to its place of origin.

Museums also must come face to face with the fact that they are in a position of power when it comes to education and public influence. With this power comes a responsibility to present an ethical and accurate representation of the cultures they aim to educate in. Many believe that “because museums come from the voice and authority of power [they must] help tell those stories from that community’s voice. Repatriation kind of really kicks museums to start opening up those channels of communications.”⁴⁴ The public trusts museums to give them accurate information, meaning that they have the power to influence the narratives that many people believe.⁴⁵ Considering this, museums can amplify the voices of the communities they consult. Legally, museums do not own an object and have a moral duty to contact and get the consent of its source community. However, having an open conversation about objects needing to be repatriated can lead a museum to be able to amplify the voices of people who had previously been stolen from and silenced. Museums can continue to educate on objects from Native American tribes and other oppressed groups, but it should be the source community’s voice being heard and their choices directing the narrative.

Barriers Faced During Repatriation

Despite its importance and the desire to strive for decolonization, repatriation is not an easy process to complete. Many museums still struggle to repatriate objects for a variety of

⁴⁴ Chole (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 29th, 2024.

⁴⁵ Cherstin M. Lyon, Elizabeth M. Nix, and Rebecca K. Shrum. *Introduction to public history: Interpreting the past, engaging audiences*. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 124.

reasons. I asked all of my interviewees what some of the greatest barriers they have faced are and I received some very similar answers.

The largest barrier that museums face is one that I heard over and over: cost. Jade sighed heavily through her nose and pursed her lips when I asked about some of the major barriers she has faced during repatriation. She barely thought for a second before she answered, “Cost is number one because it comes as a boundary for pretty much every step.”⁴⁶ Every part of the repatriation process has a cost associated with it. Paying consultants, paying employees for the extra work associated with extensive inventories, buying materials needed for storage, getting permits needed for shipping, and so many more steps all require a significant amount of money. While museums often have a certain amount of money allocated for the costs surrounding deaccessioning objects and are aware of the need to repatriate some of their collections is it still “typically a budget item that is not always accounted for. It's not as robust as it could be.”⁴⁷ Reagan had initially answered the same way Jade did with a simple statement of “cost” without missing a beat. Along with the baseline cost of everything that Jade had also expressed, she also expanded on how the potential spontaneity of repatriation can become an issue. She took a deep breath “You might have repatriations that pop up that you hadn't planned on coming around. If you've had a formal claim on your object, you need to move quickly. You might not have budgeted for that.”⁴⁸ Even if your museum has a certain amount allotted towards costs associated with deaccessioning or repatriation, there can be unexpected claims made that the museum cannot complete efficiently without proper funding.

⁴⁶ Jade (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 5th, 2024.

⁴⁷ Reagan (manager of curatorial affairs), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 14th, 2024.

⁴⁸ Reagan (manager of curatorial affairs), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 14th, 2024.

Along with associated costs, time can also be a valuable resource that museums do not have. In the words of Jane “I mean it's kind of like with anything in a museum: [the major problem is] time and resources.”⁴⁹ Repatriation can take years to complete, meaning that it can be taxing on a museum’s time and resources if they do not have someone on staff dedicated to dealing with NAGPRA-based issues. When I talked to collections workers, archivists, registrars, collections managers, and curators alike talked about how long the entirety of the repatriation process can take. When I asked Kelly about some of the major issues that she has experienced during the repatriation process, she looked towards the ceiling with a sigh. “I think it's just a longer process, especially with contacting different tribal leaders. It can take a while. It’s emails. It's phone calls. It's letters. It's a lot. You know, everybody's on a different schedule. Everyone's busy.”⁵⁰ While it takes staff a massive amount of time to do summaries and take extensive inventories, the tribe’s time is also something that needs to be considered. As Kelly said, contacting different tribal leaders can take a massive amount of time.

Along with the museum’s staffing and time issues, tribes also often do not have the time and resources necessary to respond to the massive amount of NAGPRA notifications they receive. As busy as the museum is, Jade also pointed out that “some of [tribes] have limited resources. Some of them may not have a tribal or THPO: Tribal Historic Preservation Officer. They have a lot of things on their plate... just because it may be a priority for us, it may not be for them.” She further explained, “We're not the only museum so I'm sure tribes are feeling absolutely slammed with emails and requests.”⁵¹ Even if a museum sends out all of those emails, phone calls, and letters, a tribe may be so overwhelmed with contact requests that they will not

⁴⁹ Jane (collections manager), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 28th, 2023.

⁵⁰ Kelly (curator), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 22nd, 2023.

⁵¹ Jade (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 5th, 2024.

be able to get back to your institution for months or even years. Beyond that, even after a tribe answers or makes a request and continual contact is smooth, there are still bureaucratic steps that need to be taken that will take time. Jane highlighted this specifically as she looked towards the ceiling, huffing out a breath, “As with anything in bureaucracy it takes forever.”⁵² After the museum has sent the object’s information to the Federal Register, it can take months for it to be published. It then must be on the register for 90 days with no contestations before the museum can move forward with repatriation. Institution 2 recently completed a repatriation in about two years which is unbelievably fast in the museum industry. Everything with that repatriation was able to run so smoothly because there was a clear claim and process that had been completed by another museum with the same item. It is almost guaranteed that any repatriation will take over three years to complete since people on both ends are simply busy or have larger issues to handle. As Reagan put it: “We don't drive a speedboat in the museum world, we drive a barge and it's a really slow return.”⁵³

Some museums are lucky to be in a position where they were able to get a grant that specifically allows both time and resources to work on NAGPRA-based projects. Institution 1 was in an advantaged position because they had been awarded a grant that was specifically dedicated to NAGPRA. Jane seemed to let out a breath as she brought up the grant, a soft laugh escaping her.

Resources are really the thing we're lucky to have here. Because we have had the grant to work on it. My time is supposed to be 20% on the grant. It might be hard for other places to dedicate that if you're just a smaller museum, or your institution doesn't prioritize it.⁵⁴

⁵² Jane (collections manager), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 28th, 2023.

⁵³ Reagan (manager of curatorial affairs), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 14th, 2024.

⁵⁴ Jane (collections manager), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 28th, 2023.

NAGPRA has grants that museums can apply for that can be applied specifically to consultation and documentation or “costs associated with the packaging, transportation, contamination removal, and/or storage of NAGPRA-related human remains and cultural items.”⁵⁵ However, applying for these grants requires even more time and attention from the institution. Whoever is in charge of NAGPRA operations must draft and send a grant application, something that can be a very arduous process. Jane was extremely grateful to have gotten a NAGPRA grant but also acknowledged that “even for us going forward, I mean, it could be monetary.”⁵⁶ Once their grant runs out, they will no longer have specifically allotted time and funds to dedicate to repatriation. This does not mean that their efforts will stop, but it will mean that the process will slow as less time and resources are directed toward NAGPRA.

Another major struggle that museums face during the repatriation process can come from board members, curators, donors, or any higher-up in the museum. Mary huffed an almost laugh when I asked her about some of the major barriers. “Resistance. Usually, it comes from within the house.”⁵⁷ Not from those in her department, she made clear as someone else walked by with a laugh, but there are so many other layers in a museum system, that there are bound to be differences in opinions. Many interviewees suggested that perceptions surrounding repatriation had changed during their time at their institution. Many people had not been working in the museum field for a long enough time, but I got some clear answers from those who had been working for 10+ years. Jade hummed after I asked, leaning back in her chair “Five years ago, I think it was very negative. We have shifted a whole lot in the field to be for it to become a

⁵⁵ <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/grant-opportunities.htm>

⁵⁶ Jane (collections manager), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 28th, 2023.

⁵⁷ Mary (curatorial assistant), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 9th, 2024.

positive thing and where it's just something that happens at museums now.”⁵⁸ Five years ago, it was much harder to get objects approved for repatriation.

Another reason collections professionals receive resistance surrounding repatriation circles back to ownership. In expanding on her original statement of resistance, Mary stated that “a lot of the time, the resistance that comes from doing the work is because people have concerns for the greater collection. Or it could be a control issue. Sometimes people still think ‘This is our stuff. They can't just like come in and do whatever they want with it.’”⁵⁹ In some cases, board members may hold the belief that an object that is in the museum’s collection is rightfully theirs, even if NAGPRA states otherwise. This sentiment is often reflected by older members of museum communities as they believe that the museum should have a duty to their community to keep and educate on that object. However, in recent years, boards have become much more accepting of the reality of who owns legal title to an object “We don't quite have a block that we had 10 years ago when I started of ‘the museum bought that, so we have clear title.’”⁶⁰ In the modern day, most staff and board members are aware of the legal precedent NAGPRA sets out and are happy to comply with it. There are still some that are resistant to it, but most people I interacted with and heard about in interviews were on board with repatriation.

Museums also sometimes face resistance from donors. As service to the public became the explicit purpose of museums, however, many ethical issues arose around deaccession that museums were forced to find ways to navigate. Wendy Dickieson, a practicing attorney, discusses some of the debates surrounding deaccessioning that expand to objects that are eligible for repatriation. Dickieson discusses how a primary point of contention in any process that

⁵⁸ Jade (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 5th, 2024.

⁵⁹ Mary (curatorial assistant), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 9th, 2024.

⁶⁰ Jade (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 5th, 2024.

removes an object from the collection has been the issue of museum objects as part of the public trust.⁶¹ Since museums are non-profit organizations that now hold a specific goal of serving the public, they cannot claim to “own the artworks in their collections, they truly only hold those works as an act of public stewardship, and thus incur legal, social, and ethical obligations to provide proper care for the collections.”⁶²

Both institutions have also had issues when it comes to donated objects that they have had to learn to navigate in their own ways. When I talked to Julie, the archivist at Institution 1, she specified that there are many cases where donors “want to add stipulations... [but] we try to avoid making promises.”⁶³ Institution 1 tries not to accept objects that have multiple stipulations placed on them, making it less likely that there will be issues during deaccessioning or repatriation. In the case of Institution 2, “the donor will be notified that the object has been deaccessioned... We're not asking their permission; we're just letting them know what's happened.”⁶⁴ Jade, a registrar, specified that the museum simply states that neither they nor the donor are legally allowed to own the object under NAGPRA, making it less likely that there will be any issues since they have the law to fall back on. She had never experienced much pushback on those notifications before since they usually say that the object is being returned to the source community. It is not impossible, however, so it is important to avoid making any promises while also being ready to talk to donors about the legal and ethical problems keeping that object might cause in the future.

⁶¹ Wendy Dickieson. “The Deaccession Dilemma: Themes in the American Debate about Art Museum Deaccessions.” *Theory and Practice: Museum Futures: Shifting Technology, Culture, and Politics*, vol. 1 (2018).

⁶² Wendy Dickieson. “The Deaccession Dilemma: Themes in the American Debate about Art Museum Deaccessions.” *Theory and Practice: Museum Futures: Shifting Technology, Culture, and Politics*, vol. 1 (2018).

⁶³ Julie (archivist), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 20th, 2023

⁶⁴ Jade (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 5th, 2024.

Steps to Success

While repatriation can be difficult, there are common steps that both institutions I studied took to facilitate successful repatriations. One of the major contributing factors to the success of repatriation is the framework that NAGPRA provides. As I was talking to Jane, she gestured to the shelf of books right behind her that all had colorful bookmarks poking out of them.

I've been doing quite a bit of reading as you can see, and I think that the US has done a great job having NAGPRA because other countries do not have that framework. They don't even have that framework in Canada. And I do think, while some universities and museums have not been as compliant or haven't been as timely in their repatriation efforts, that at least there's a framework and there are ramifications for that.⁶⁵

The U.S. has a framework set up that can lead to smoother repatriations and consequences for those who do not comply. Setting a standard of creating and sharing summaries, bringing in consultants, contacting tribes, and even offering funding for expenses related to the entire process is much more than many other countries have. Jane wasn't the only one who expressed gratitude for the framework and rules that NAGPRA puts in place. Mary, a curatorial assistant at Institution 2, agreed that NAGPRA "has some pretty serious teeth" that require museums to repatriate while also giving them a clear path to follow.⁶⁶ NAGPRA sets a clear precedent for how objects should be dealt with and has consequences for those who do not go through that process. All institutions should be invested in repatriation and NAGPRA makes sure that they have a reason to be. NAGPRA may have quite a few hoops that need to be jumped through, but it also paves a clear path to returning objects to their countries of origin by setting up legal precedence.

As can be seen from the issues that persist, the framework that NAGPRA provides is only the starting point for successful repatriation that needs to be actively pursued by people inside

⁶⁵ Jane (collections manager), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 28th, 2023.

⁶⁶ Mary (curatorial assistant), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 9th, 2024.

the museum. As Jade put it, “a lot of the burden should fall within the museum.”⁶⁷ However, not all museum professionals follow that same school of thought. While there is a path for museums to follow, the institution must put in a significant amount of work to make sure that they are complying with NAGPRA. Sometimes, collections managers do not dedicate time to working on NAGPRA projects or purposefully avoid them. Both institutions I studied are lucky to have collections professionals who are passionate about NAGPRA and are taking an active approach to NAGPRA. The professionals at these institutions make a concentrated effort to identify and return objects that may be subject to repatriation under NAGPRA.

When I asked Mary about some of the ways her institution had engaged in ethical practices, she nodded quickly “A lot of the time now the call is coming from within the house. It's often Jade or Reagan saying, ‘Hey, we have this thing, let's figure out how to get home.’”⁶⁸ At Institution 2, their most recent repatriation started because “Reagan found out through a webinar, what the vigango (Kenyan spiritual poles) are and that they needed to be repatriated.”⁶⁹ Reagan was not required to attend that webinar, but the fact that she took a personal interest in attending it allowed her to identify an object that the museum should not have. Reagan and her colleagues such as Mary and Jade all take a personal interest in NAGPRA and try to attend webinars and talk to people in their institutions about repatriation efforts. The same is true in Institution 1. Jane actively pursues repatriation efforts. She does personal research, hires interns to help with research she is unable to dedicate time to and makes sure to take every opportunity to do surveys and consultations. While NAGPRA is starting to grow some “serious teeth,” it is hard to enforce on a wide scale, allowing some museums to avoid complying with it. Without

⁶⁷ Jade (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 5th, 2024.

⁶⁸ Mary (curatorial assistant), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 9th, 2024.

⁶⁹ Jade (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 5th, 2024.

people in a museum who are dedicated to following the path that NAGPRA provides, a museum may simply not pursue repatriation.

By proactively completing and publishing inventories of their collections, museums can also place themselves on a faster path to successful repatriation. Jade spoke about how valuable completing summaries and publishing them can be since “[tribes] can approach us outright if they've seen something on the website or they've heard XYZ is here.”⁷⁰ She went on to talk about how they encourage tribes to reach out to them on their website and the NAGPRA websites in the hopes that they can move forward more efficiently. Along with completing inventory summaries, consultations allow for a more complete understanding of what is in the collection and what should and should not be repatriated. Consultants are an invaluable resource that should be utilized as much as possible. While a museum can rely on their research and wait for claims, “consultants [are] so helpful, because they’re especially knowledgeable in that area of objects.”⁷¹ They often have connections with tribes and knowledge in certain areas that a museum would not be able to cultivate without years of interaction.

Another important part of repatriation I identified in my research was making sure that your institution is in consistent communication with the people you are trying to return objects to. While making first contact with a tribe through a letter or email is important, continuing to communicate and build a relationship is essential. When she was talking about some of the difficulties making contact with tribes and determining provenance, Julie said “I think if anything, having those conversations strengthens our relationships with the local indigenous tribes and Native American communities.”⁷² Even if a tribe determines that no objects are theirs

⁷⁰ Jade (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 5th, 2024.

⁷¹ Kelly (curator), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 22nd, 2023.

⁷² Julie (archivist), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 20th, 2023

or that they do not want to move forward with repatriation yet, it is still important to open those channels of communication for the future. Being open and transparent can make tribes more comfortable communicating with the institution in the future and they can often point collections professionals in the right direction if they need to. As Chloe was talking about some of the ways museums can make the repatriation process more accessible, she mentioned that “always having those open conversations is most important and you just have to keep telling yourself that so much of the anthropological collections that museums have come from a bad space.”⁷³ It isn’t the museum’s fault that they have these objects, but creating relationships with tribal communities and being open to conversation can help museums create a more accessible environment that streamlines the repatriation process.

However, there are times when repatriation is not possible, but a tribe has still stipulated that the object should not be on display. In those cases, a certain amount of responsibility is placed upon the museum to ensure that their collection is being ethically managed. Chloe, an exhibitions registrar, had the most in-depth perspective on this. She smiled as she talked about it, speaking quickly, and counting things off on her fingers.

I've had the privilege of working with many communities and we've had to address handling practices. [Such as] when people should physically touch objects and when they should not physically touch objects. If things, for example, need to be stored at a higher level in the actual storage units because that is their place of power. If objects need to have food fed to them because they need nourishment. If tribal gowns, capes, or blankets need to be danced to shake off excessive energy. If smudging needs to happen to protect the object from staff members or the staff needs to be protected from the object. There's a whole bunch of communication and education that happens between registration and collection staff and tribal representatives.⁷⁴

Even if the tribe has elected not to repatriate an object that belongs to them, the museum is still often given instructions on how to properly take care of it while it is in storage. By keeping the

⁷³ Chloe (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 29th, 2024.

⁷⁴ Chloe (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, February 29th, 2024.

object and properly caring for it, the institution can continue to build a positive relationship with a tribe while keeping its collections ethically healthy. Caring for these objects can be difficult and may take special resources, but keeping and caring for these objects with the consent of the tribe can be essential to cultivating museum ethics. By making sure they are in constant communication with tribes and properly caring for the objects in their care, the museum puts the power over the object in the hands of the tribe, where it morally and legally should be.

Part 3: Conclusion

Although repatriation can be difficult, there is no denying that it is worth it to the professionals I interacted with. There are many barriers that a museum can face when it comes to starting or attempting repatriation such as time, resources, and resistance. As Mary and Jade both talked about, there is little resistance in their institution. It has not always been that way and Mary acknowledged that “100% of people are [never] going to be fully on board, but I think the number of people who are resistant is dwindling.”⁷⁵ As a new wave of professionals enters museum careers and older professionals retire, museums become less resistant to repatriation and other ethical issues. New minds bring new ideas which can lead to development within the institution. When it comes to time and resources, Kelly smiled and gave a small huff of a laugh before she said “Well, it's like you pull a thread and this whole other thing opens up. It is a lot. It is a long process, but it's an important process.”⁷⁶ Repatriation is a process that continually opens doors to more work, but it is necessary and healthy for the museum. Museums must be willing and able to go through repatriation to create an ethical environment that puts the power in the hands of those whose objects are unlawfully in the museum’s collections.

Museums can and should be places that represent and use the objects they have in their collections. However, they must maintain an ethical environment at the same time. While an object may seem like just an object to an outside perspective, we need to realize that when we are talking about tribes and human remains, “these are people you're talking about, real people. Sometimes museums... want to share information, we want to educate... And I think there's a way to do that that's not hurting others.”⁷⁷ Museums are a place where people come to appreciate

⁷⁵ Jane (collections manager), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 28th, 2023.

⁷⁶ Kelly (curator), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 22nd, 2023.

⁷⁷ Kelly (curator), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, June 22nd, 2023.

cultures but there is a right and wrong way to present information. Museums need to communicate with tribes and cultivate relationships, so they can create exhibits that are representative and ethical. The key to achieving this good and representative exhibit is simple: consent and communication. By getting a community's consent and keeping communication open with them on the information being shown to the public, museums can ensure that they are creating good, representative spaces. A museum will always be an educational space but, as Jade put it: "As opposed to this ivory column temple where you come to learn about other cultures... museums are being seen much more as a community where everyone comes together and collaborates."⁷⁸ Repatriation brings more than just the museum's immediate community into conversation with it, it allows those being represented to have a say. By understanding and participating in repatriation collections professionals can continue to create an inclusive and representative experience for everyone.

⁷⁸ Jade (registrar), interview by Rachel Sudbeck, March 5th, 2024.

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