Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit

Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte

Larissa Förster, Iris Edenheiser, Sarah Fründt, Heike Hartmann (Hrsg.)

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Das Buch versammelt die Beiträge zur gleichnamigen Tagung am 7./8. April 2017 – veranstaltet von der AG Museum der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie (DGSKA) und dem Museum Fünf Kontinente, München. Herausgeberinnen und Autor_innen behandeln darin u.a. die Frage nach einer sinnvollen Systematisierung und Institutionalisierung von postkolonialer Provenienzforschung, nach internationaler Vernetzung, insbesondere zu den Herkunftsländern und -gesellschaften, und stellen aktuelle Forschungs- und Ausstellungsprojekte zum Thema vor.

The book collects the contributions to the conference of the same name that took place on 7th/8th April 2017, and was organised by the Working Group on Museums of the German Anthropological Association and the Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich. Editors and authors discuss issues such as meaningful systematization and institutionalization of postcolonial provenance research, international networking and collaboration, in particular with regards to source countries and communities, and present current research and exhibition projects on the subject.

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Digitally Analysing Colonial Collecting

The »Return, Reconcile, Renew Project«

Paul Turnbull

It seems best to begin this paper with a brief account of the origins of the »Return, Reconcile, Renew Project« (hereafter RRR). It arose out of conversations through 2013, among several of the current research team with expertise in provenance research, supporting Indigenous Australians in repatriating the bodily remains of their ancestors – Old People, as they respectfully call them – from museums and other Western medico-scientific institutions to their care for reburial.

Best estimates suggest that the remains (mostly skulls) of as many as 13,000 Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders were acquired from the early years of British colonisation of Australia until the late 1970s. The motivation for the collection of these remains was an abiding curiosity in metropolitan European and colonial scientific circles about the nature and probable causes of human variation. After 1860, the remains of Aboriginal Australians were seen as likely sources of important clues about humanity's deep past.

For anatomists and anthropologists who endorsed Darwin's argument that humanity had evolved from some long extinct pithecoid ancestor, Aboriginal Australians appeared to be a »race«, or group of closely related »racial types« of humankind that they believed were biologically closest in evolutionarily terms to this ancestral form. Darwinian scientists and intellectuals reasoned that environmental factors had operated in ways that had left Aboriginal Australians trapped in evolutionary stasis. As leading Darwinian T.H. Huxley observed of the Australian skulls he examined that had been acquired by London's Royal College of Surgeons, »A small additional amount of flattening and lengthening, with a corresponding increase of the supraciliary ridge would convert the Aust-

ralian brain case into a form identical with … [that of Neanderthal]« (Huxley 1863: 155). It followed, or so Darwinians reasoned, that this »stone age« people were very likely incapable of adapting to the invasion of their ancestral lands by supposedly more advanced European types.

There were British and continental European scientists who were critical of Darwin's evolutionary argument; but they too were keen to see the remains of Australia's first peoples obtained for anthropological collections. They believed that the typical shape of the crania of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders invited the conclusion that humanity comprised not one but several separately originating species, each of which had experienced only superficial biological modifications. In short, the bodily remains of Aboriginal Australians were universally regarded as particularly valuable scientific material in understanding the deep past of humankind. Museums in the capital cities of the Australian colonies amassed substantial collections of skeletal material, while the remains of over a 1,000 people from communities across Australia were acquired by medico-scientific institutions in Britain, continental Europe and North America (Turnbull 2017).

By the mid-1970s, Indigenous Australians had secured sufficient political agency and resources to begin seeking the return of the remains of their Old People from museums and other medico-scientific collections in an organised fashion. By the early 1990s, community leaders had convinced Australian politicians and policy makers, museum personnel and university-based researchers with interests in human remains to recognise their right to unconditional repatriation of their ancestors› remains. By this time, it was also generally conceded by museums and other collecting institutions that their ongoing possession of Indigenous cultural property was subject to recognition of the rights of communities from whence the items in question originated to say how they should be curated and exhibited. And by the early 2000s, the Australian Federal Government had implemented a framework for supporting the efforts of Indigenous communities to secure the return of their dead for burial from overseas scientific collections (IRP 2017).

Even so, repatriations of the remains of Old People from overseas museums have often proven to be complex affairs, which in a number of instances have seen communities encounter difficulties that, in some cases, have unfortunately caused distress and anger. It is not possible to discuss in any depth why repatriations from collections outside of Australia have proved challenging within the confines of this short paper. Suffice to say that the RRR project has its origins in discussions about the challenges of repatriation between Indigenous

and non-Indigenous researchers based in several Australian universities and museums, and key personnel of organisations representing three communities actively engaged in repatriating their Old People (the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority; the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre; and the Torres Strait Regional Authority). The consensus arising out of these discussions was that given the complexities of repatriation, it would be valuable to develop a project in which the Ngarrindjeri Nation and communities of the Kimberley region of Western Australia and the Torres Strait were able to share their knowledge and experiences of repatriation with communities across Australia only beginning or yet to begin the process of bringing the remains of their ancestors' home to country.

What also arose of these discussions was a consensus that any project aiming to assist communities in returning their ancestors to country should encompass the creation of a knowledge bank assisting them to gain whatever information might exist in Western medico-scientific archives and libraries relating to the provenance of remains of Old People they sought for return for burial in their ancestral country. Several of the RRR team, being experienced historical researchers, were of the view that this would be a challenging task. It would entail reconstructing in fine grained detail the historical contexts in which the remains of Old People were collected, and who did so: i.e. museum personnel, scientists, colonial officials and often times settlers in many different walks of life. It would also require documenting how these Old People figured in the knowledge-making and interactions between personnel associated with museums, university medical schools and other medico-scientific institutions (Fforde et. al. 2015).

The view of the RRR team was that the challenge of creating a knowledge bank could be met in large measure by employing a web-based content management and publication system to capture the wealth of information they had accumulated in the course of their prior provenance research, and also the results of new investigations of museum records and other archival sources relating to overseas collections of human remains the project would undertake. What is more, the project would require a web-based system that would not only allow for the collection and analysis of provenance research. It would also need to be designed so as to allow Indigenous Elders, knowledge custodians and community-based researchers to access the project's findings - and to provide further contextual information to our findings. There would also need to be scope for recording additional historical information found in the course of researching the provenance of remains of value to community members in developing their own projects to document their history and cultural heritage.

For as Neil Carter, the repatriation officer of the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, and member of the RRR research team, was to observe in the course of developing the project, the return of Old People from Stockholm's Etnografiska Museet/Museum of Ethnography to the care of Kimberley communities in 2004 and 2008 had led to ancestral communities gaining copies of field notes by the anthropologist who had plundered traditional burial places for the bones of these Old People. The notes were found to contain valuable information about events and cultural activities at the time of the outrage.

As for finding a content management and publication system meeting the project's needs in respect of provenance research, it was relatively easy to decide upon using the Online Heritage Resource Manager (OHRM) – a system developed by Gavan McCarthy and Joanne Evans at the Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre of the University of Melbourne.[1] There were several reasons for choosing the OHRM, as I have discussed at some length elsewhere (Turnbull 2016). But essentially, the attraction of the system was that in its design it reflects the expertise of Gavan McCarthy in developing a system in which museum and other archival records of interest to historians and heritage researchers could be described in the web environment so that they provide contextual information. Being an archivist by training, McCarthy could see that the provision of sufficient contextual information of the kind enabling the collection and analysis of historical records illustrative of the collecting and scientific uses of Indigenous human remains would require a system that drew on archivists long and successful history in modelling knowledge domains. Hence a great advantage of the OHRM in its development path since the late 1990s has been its capacity to enable user communities – such as the RRR team – to construct an ontology within the system enabling the description and representation of the particular kinds of interrelationships between the entities that had agency in the history of the collecting of the remains of Indigenous Australians' Old People in the colonial past. That is the people, the organisations, the places, the events and moreover the cultural norms and practices that structured past thought and action. A problem with many content management systems that could be used by researchers with similar aspirations but, like most of the RRR team, limited computational expertise, is their relative lack of flexibility when it comes to describing and representing relations between entities.

Research on the provenance of the remains of Indigenous Australians' Old People requires the reconstruction of differing kinds of relations between many different individuals who were often linked to multiple scientific communities

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1   see http://www.austehc.unimelb.edu.au/ohrm/ (accessed 31.10.2017).

and institutions with differing ambitions in respect of the collecting and scientific investigation of remains (Fforde et al. 2015). To give one illustration of the challenge: in 2010, I decided to make digital copies of a substantial volume of notes that I had taken some years earlier when reading through late nineteenth century correspondence surviving in the archives of the Queensland Museum in Brisbane. In the process, my attention was drawn to a letter telling of the display at Colonial Exhibitions held in Sydney and Melbourne in the early 1880s of the remains of a man taken from a ceremonial ground just west of the present-day North Queensland city of Cairns. Meeting Michaela Appel, the curator of Oceanian ethnology at Munich's Museum Fünf Kontinente, in 2015, I found that Michaela had been researching the provenance of the remains of a man held by the museum whom she (rightly) assumed was from North Queensland. She had established that the remains were acquired in Sydney by Max Buchner, the director of the museum, then Königlich Ethnografische Sammlung, between 1887 and 1907. By reconstructing the network of relations between people, places and events using digital surrogates of relevant historical documents, we were able to confirm that the remains acquired by Buchner were those taken from the ceremonial ground west of Cairns (Turnbull and Appel, forthcoming: 2018).

Using the OHRM has provided the RRR team with the means of investigating and understanding the relations between a great many entities (i.e., the remains of Old People, their communities, collectors, medico-scientific institutions, documents, etc.). And as new historical information has been added to the OHRM, the computationally-based analysis it enables has so far led to several important discoveries concerning existence and provenance of the remains of Old People from Australian Indigenous communities in European and American collections.

Importantly, the OHRM differs from open-source content management systems commonly used by researchers in the humanities and social sciences. A more technical summary of the features of the OHRM and its use in the RRR project has been provided in an appendix to this paper. Suffice to say here that our goal has been to register multiple relations of different kinds between the historical entities of interest to RRR researchers and our partnering Indigenous organisations. Also, the design of the OHRM is such that it has been relatively easy to use visualisation software to identify and analyse connections between entities. For example, figure 1 visualises the data so far placed with the OHRM relating to the collecting of the remains by Western museums and medical schools of Old People of the Ngarrindjeri Nation, Communities of the Kimber-
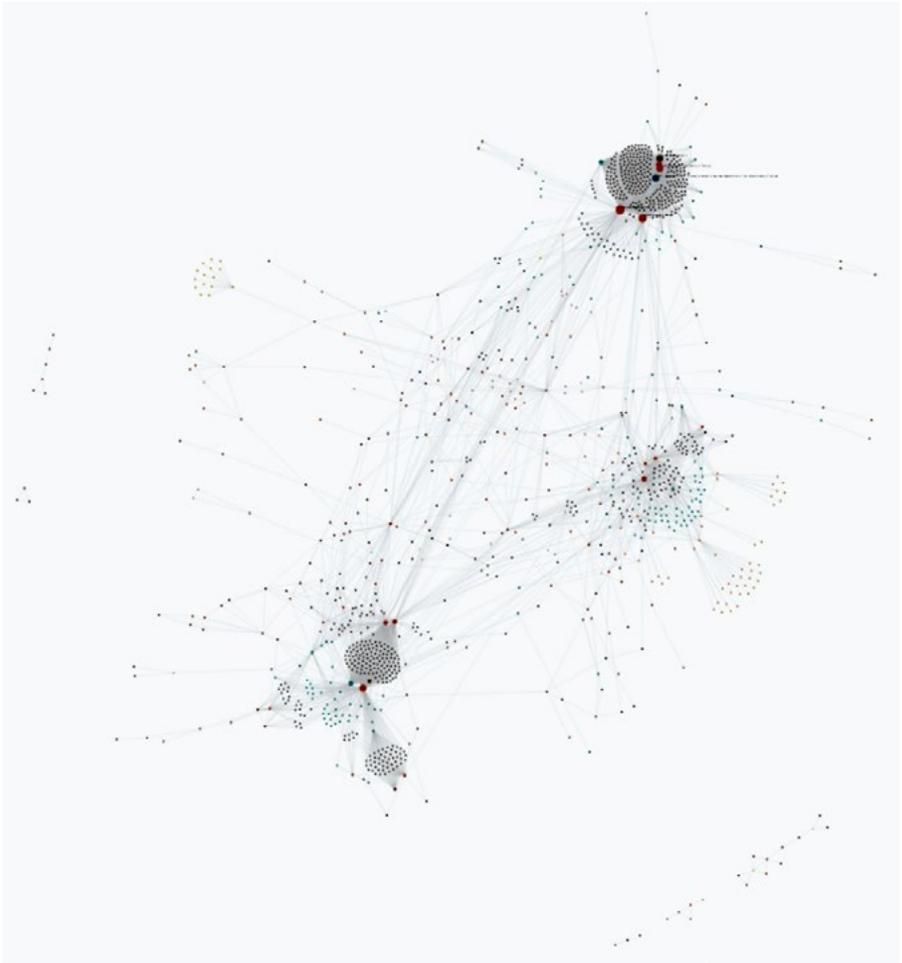
[fig. 1] Collecting by Western museums and medical schools of Old People of the Ngarrindjeri Nation, Communities of the Kimberley Region of Western Australia, and the islands of the Torres Strait, from around 1860 to the 1920s.

ley Region of Western Australia, and the islands of the Torres Strait, from around 1860 to the 1920s.

At the time of writing it is not possible to provide access beyond members of the RRR team and our partner organisations to interactive, scalable visualisations of the relations between the various types of entity (people, places, institutions, events, etc.) registered within the OHRM. But figure 1 hopefully gives some sense of the potential benefits of being able to visually analyse the history of collecting and scientific uses of the remains of Indigenous Australians' Old People. What can be seen in this »high-level« view of relations between entities is a large cluster of small dots towards the top of figure 1 which are connected to several large, coloured dots. The clustered small dots are the remains of Ngarrindjeri Old People taken from ancestral burial places between 1830 and 1920. The large coloured dots are European medico-scientific institutions that acquired these remains. The clusters of small dots at the bottom of figure 1 represent the theft of the remains of Old People of Torres Strait Island communities. Here, there are several large dots in close proximity that again represent both collectors and institutions that acquired remains. What is more, one can also see lines running from top to bottom between the large clusters. These lines draw attention to the acquisition of remains of Old People from both Ngarrindjeri country and the Torres Strait by several medico-scientific institutions around the turn of the nineteenth century. But what is perhaps most interesting about this visualisation is that many of these lines are connected to the top and bottom clusters via one or more intermediate dots, many of which represent individuals with connections to known collectors or scientific institutions that have yet to be investigated as possible sources of further information concerning the provenance of the remains of Old People yet to be repatriated from European and North American collections.

The OHRM is also being used in achieving another important aim of the RRR Project: this is assisting the creation of information resources and training materials for communities around Australia who have yet to begin, or are in the early stages of the process of repatriating their Old People. These community resources are being created either by or under the direction of Indigenous members of the research team. They draw on the outcomes of the provenance research that members of the team are undertaking; but importantly they are being designed under the direction of Indigenous team-members so that the knowledge and experiences of the communities to which they belong can be shared with those whose Old People are yet to be brought home to country.

Over a decade ago, Tiffany Jenkins, a British sociologist well-known for her opposition to repatriation claimed that

> »… the campaign to repatriate [the dead] is detrimental to those it claims to help. It certainly cannot solve the very serious social problems that affect people's lives today … the repatriation movement reinforces the politics of victim-hood, it has promoted vulnerability as a key feature of identity.« (Jenkins 2004: 6)

Jenkins and others have since rehearsed this charge in various scholarly and public forums, more often than not when criticising Western museums for deciding to return a range of different kinds of cultural artefacts obtained through plundering in contexts of colonialism to postcolonial nations (see Jenkins 2016). Yet the RRR project team have gathered a wealth of evidence as to the positive contribution that repatriation has made to well-being within Indigenous communities through invigorating cultural identity, which in turn has strengthened the resolve of communities to overcome the many detrimental legacies of colonialism. The Kimberley region, for example, saw some of the worst instances of frontier violence in Australia's colonial history. For Indigenous Australians, the desecration of burial places in order to furnish scientists and museums with specimen skulls and other skeletal material is a powerful, hurtful reminder of this terrible time in their history. But returning the dead to the care of their ancestral country has done quite the opposite of feeding a politics of victimhood. Repatriation has helped to fortify confidence in the future.

This paper has briefly described the employment by the RRR project of a content management and publication system for analysing current and future knowledge of the collecting and scientific uses of the remains of Indigenous Australian's Old People. While there is still much work to do, the system is already enabling the RRR team to explore previously unrecognised relations between historical entities with a view to determining the existence and provenance of the remains of Old People in medico-scientific collections outside of Australia. The system is also proving useful by assisting the project's partner organisations (the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority; the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre; and the Torres Strait Regional Authority) in creation of information resources which are likely to be of great help to communities likely to seek the repatriation of their Old People in the near future.

    The use of digital technology by the RRR project naturally reflects its goal of addressing needs in respect of repatriation in the Australian context. However,

the project's use of technology is in large measure focused on digitally reconstructing and analysing the complex historical landscape of scientific aspirations, anthropological collecting and colonial ambitions in which the plundering of the Indigenous Australian dead occurred during the long nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hence there may be things that other researchers and museum professionals concerned to establish the provenance of items in colonial era collections might learn from the use of digital technology by the RRR project.

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Appendix: A Brief Technical Summary of the RRR Project's Use of the Online Heritage Resource Manager (OHRM)

Importantly, the OHRM differs from the type of open-source content management system commonly used by researchers in the humanities and social sciences. These systems usually comprise a server-side relational database (MySQL, PostgreSQL) into which content is put in forms enabling it to be called up and examined by users via a web-browser through the use of scripts, which most commonly are written in the PHP scripting language. The key difference is that the database at the core of the OHRM does not sit on a server, but on a personal computer running Microsoft Access on a Windows operating system. Rather than use an open source relational database, it exploits the power of Access to register multiple relations of different kinds between data in numerous different tables. However, the OHRM is not a proprietary system. While it harnessed the capacity of Access to register multiple relations between specific entities in different tables, it uses open code to represent those relationships in a range of open formats. For example, the content of an OHRM and the relations between entities therein can be exported as hyperlinked »flat« XHTML pages. These files can then be loaded to predetermined folders on a server by means of simple scripting. A typical example of OHRM XHTML output can be seen at: http://www.chia.chinesemuseum.com.au/biogs/CH01012b. htm; a more complex example can be found at: http://adb.anu.edu.au/.

A considerable advantage of this approach is that the ontological ordering and interrelation of information within the OHRM can be clearly expressed in XHTML files that have a ›real presence‹, one might say. This enables their citation like other web-based resources with the confidence that the resource will persist via a URL or Digital Object Identifier. Moreover, the XHTML output function of the OHRM is designed so that each page is »printed out« to disk with a rich metadata record (generally a Dublin Core record), in its header. This means that OHRM output soon enjoys a high degree of discoverability via commercial search engines such as Google, or specialized scholarly discovery services.

The RRR Project's use of the OHRM comes at the new stage of its development. For some time it has been possible to export content from the system as Encoded Archival Context records (EAC) This is an XML standard for encoding information about entities and their relations to other relevant entities. The EAC standard was designed to be used with finding aids for archival collections written using a related XML standard: the Encoded Archival Description (EAD). But for researchers using the OHRM, the value of being able to export content

as EAC records is twofold: firstly, it provides a translation path ensuring the long-term duration of data within an OHRM without diminishing the intellectual investment of putting it in the system and drawing contextual relations between entities figuring in the data. Secondly, there is the possibility of exploiting advances in software for visually analysing connected data.

So far EAC output from the OHRM has been visually analysed using a web services-based tool created by Gavan McCarthy's team at the eScholarship Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. The tool – named ConneX – uses a Pyramid web application with a client side interface built with the Angular.js library, and the D3.js and Cytoscape.js libraries to visualise OHRM content (the ConneX, the source code can be found at https://github.com/esrc-unimelb/CNEX).

As the team have explained in a recent article, the ConneX tool uses one force-directed algorithm for all the dataset produced by the tool, establishing consistency and predictability of visual analysis. As ConneX only accepts EAC XML, a consistent data format standard, and uses a single algorithm, it is possible for the user to compare the outputs of different collections and develop their skills in reading these graphs. By completely restricting user enhancement of the network outputs (except through filters and colouring of nodes), ConneX limits the tendency of users to drift towards »info graphics« (i.e. message-directed visualisations) rather than focusing on understanding the relationship between the data and the algorithm (Jones et al. 2017: 106).

Further refinements of the OHRM are underway. Gavan McCarthy and programmers at the eScholarship Research Centre of the University of Melbourne are working with the RRR team and other researchers to develop seamless OHRM data import and export services. To date the prime focus has been on creating the means of importing data in common transfer formats, such as the CSV format. One feature of the OHRM that has drawn criticism is that the use of a single database located on one machine limits the scope for collaborative editing of content – compared to systems in which the database is located on a server with web-based authoring tools. This is certainly true. But with improved importation tools, the drawbacks of a single, ›off-line‹ editing environment can largely be overcome – while taking advantage of the greater ability to ensure the quality of data that centralised editing systems offer.