

Final Conference of the Project “Sensitive Provenances”

Georg-August University Göttingen

Changing Ethics in Addressing Human Remains

Date: Nov. 17, 2023

Venue: Holbornsches Haus, Göttingen

Organizers: Regina F. Bendix, Jonatan Kurzwelly and Chantal Stahl

In the course of working together in interdisciplinary configuration on questions of human remains collections, ethics and their changing dynamics arose as an important issue to discuss. Our diverse disciplinary backgrounds, as well as the process of preparing and conducting two restitution of human remains, made us aware of significant differences in individual and disciplinary attitudes towards ethical considerations of postcolonial reckoning on the one hand, and scientific procedure and scientific heritage and history on the other. For example, a restitution claim made in 2022 turned out to include two crania from the collection that Johann Friedrich Blumenbach himself acquired. This collection, for some, has been seen as carrying a particular historical significance and scientific heritage, and reaching an agreement about restituting these skulls required a great deal of discussion. We are convinced that discussing the meanings and value of human remains, as well as past and present ethical attitudes toward them, will result in a better grasp of the numerous issues at stake. Another topic we discussed intensely, is the use of contemporary racial, ethnic, and national categories in both the scholarly practice related to human remains, and in facilitating restitutions. A continuous use of racial categories relates to numerous ethical and political concerns, which necessitate careful consideration.

Our project has been able to facilitate two restitution ceremonies (to Hawai'i in February 2022, and to Aotearoa/New Zealand with a Maori and Moriori delegation in June 2023). The university has several further restitution claims awaiting preparation. Our project will end before all of these claims can be fully addressed, and more are likely to come. What became clear for us from the beginning of the project, however, is that restitution will only lead to a partial and limited redress, and numerous ethical considerations remain open. One major issue is addressing all the human remains which are not asked for and the “provenance” of which will be impossible to establish due to lacking archival materials. What ethical standards should be applied to the future handling of such “remaining remains”, and their potential use for teaching and research purposes?

The conference will unfold in three sessions, with a strong emphasis on discussion and exchange of ideas. We foresee for each presenter to offer a brief (15-20 minutes maximum) input which then will open into a round-table discussion where further discussants will join. “Note takers” from our team will be active all day and offer brief summations of central questions of the day, before a joint, concluding discussion.

ABSTRACTS

Panel 1 - history of ethics/history of anthropology

Linda Anderson Burnet (Department of History of Science and Ideas, Uppsala University) with Bruce Buchan (Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University)

Title: “Instructing Humanity, Collecting Race: Robert Jameson and the University of Edinburgh's Natural History Museum in 1817”

Abstract: In 1817, The Edinburgh Magazine published a set of instructions for natural-history collectors. Penned by Professor Robert Jameson at the University of Edinburgh, the instructions were designed to encourage Britons overseas to collect for the university's museum. Their contents ranged from technical guidance on how to preserve insects to recommendations about what to collect, such as the “warlike instruments of different Nations and Tribes”. Jameson also urged people to collect human remains and skulls in particular. During Jameson's museum stewardship a large number of skulls arrived from across the globe. University museums such as Edinburgh's were sites of research, teaching, and public engagement. They were also at the forefront of creating and disseminating colonial narratives about racial differences. Focusing on Jameson's 1817 instructions and his running of the museum in the following decades, we will analyse how the transfer of human remains between colonial locations and the university turned First Nations and Indigenous people into natural-history specimens.

Nélia Dias (Department of Anthropology, Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa | CRIA)

Title: “Human remains in the history of anthropology: status, uses, and values”

Abstract: Human remains in museum collections are considered a burden and a legacy of unequal power relationships. Therefore, a thorough historical and contextualized analysis of the provenance of human skeletal remains and of the diverse meanings and ethical implications of the term human remains might provide a more nuanced and complex perspective. The presentation will focus on one hand, on the processes through which human remains counted as evidence as well as on the use of human remains as evidence in anthropology. On the other hand, it will explore the changing conceptual contents of the term human remains entailing an awareness of culturally diverse forms of treating dead bodies. These changes also reflect the ethical issues regarding the extension of the concepts of human dignity and respect for the mortal remains of the dead. Thus, the different values involved in the current debates on human remains need to be situated in a broad comparative and historical perspective.

Martin Skrydstrup (Department of Management, Society and Communication, Copenhagen Business School/visiting fellow ANU, Canberra)

Title: “Evidential Ethics”

Abstract: When I began to frame the research question for my doctoral dissertation on repatriation I did so in a very adversarial and antagonistic climate in the U.S., where archaeologists with a forensic bend were pitted against Native Americans, often dubbed “the culture wars”. My ethnographic fieldwork largely consisted in following how the seven-member NAGPRA Review Committee made “findings” on this terrain of evidence as the Committed was tasked to make findings and

recommendations on disputes brought before it. In the aftermath of 9/11 – in a stormy November of 2001 - I witnessed the Paiute Shoshone tribe make arguments for “cultural affiliation” with the 8500 years old human remains recovered in 1940 in a small alcove in Nevada, named Spirit Cave. The position of the forensic inclined archaeologist was that Spirit Cave Man was “a kin too distant” and that the case represented “a clash between two systems of conceptualizing and tracing human history” (Owsley, 2002). The morphometric analysis demonstrated that: “the Spirit Cave skull falls outside the range of variation of modern samples, and, in particular, it shows no affinity to Native American samples. The closest biological sample is the Ainu of Japan (Owsley, 2002: 148). Fast forward to 2015, where the *Center for GeoGenetics* at the University of Copenhagen performed a genetic sequencing from 200 milligrams from the hand bone, which led to the conclusion that: “It’s very clear that the genome sequence shows that Spirit Cave Man is most closely related to contemporary Native Americans.”. (Willerslev; 2015). In the light of this case, I would like to raise the question if the Enlightenment in the shape of the new evidential regime of genome sequencing enables a mutual understanding between adherents of different moralities and beliefs? And if the remains from Spirit Cave Man are repatriated to the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe considered to most closely affiliated would such an act provide healing and closure?

Panel 2 - Contemporary bio-medical ethics

Elisabeth Gessat Anstett (French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and Aix-Marseille University)

Title: “From trash to relics: the issue of human remains’ remains”

Abstract: Most of the human remains held in scientific or cultural institutions, whether submitted or not to study and expertise, are inescapably subject to alteration and decay. The alteration processes thus create bone fragments or dust, whose fate has so far seldom been considered as such.

Even if social groups to which the initial bones are connected often tend to consider these human remains’ remains as precious relics, biological anthropology has indeed long considered these leftovers as trash. Yet, the recent progresses made by bio-chemistry and forensic sciences, in the field of DNA or isotope analyses for example, enabling expertise to be elaborated at the scale of osteon or even molecule, have opened and widen new fields of research. Bone fragments that used to be considered as non-relevant material for scientific research, can now be useful to determine the origin of unidentified human tissues and to relate these remains (no matter their size) to a precise territory if not a cultural group, the only problematic question remaining the expertise’s invasive dimension.

The issue of bone fragments or dust preservation for potential future identifications, should therefore be considered along with the other scientific, legal and moral issues raised by the conservation of unidentified human remains. Far from making our debate more complicated, these remains’ remains obliged us to depart from, and focus on, these fragments’ human nature and our responsibility toward them.

Birgit Großkopf (Historical Anthropology and Human Ecology, University of Göttingen)

Title: “Theory and reality”

Abstract: The presentation will focus on two main topics. Firstly, it will be described how the conditions in a large skeleton collection should ideally be and how this contrasts with reality due to

lack of space, money and manpower. With regard to skeletal material from colonial contexts, the problem is complicated because "use" for teaching and research is currently not possible, and the material should be housed appropriately. Skeletal material from colonial contexts in some ways exacerbates the resource problem, because although "use" of the skeletons in teaching and research is no longer possible, the human remains must be appropriately housed.

The second aspect deals with the specific problems that arise in the examinations of skeletal material from the colonial context. These include, for example, missing signatures, or skeletal elements that cannot be clearly assigned to a skeleton but are found in the same box. In such cases, it is not certain whether the bones were originally collected together or were rather accidentally put together in the course of the collection history. Furthermore, there are also intentional manipulations, e.g. lower jaws have been incorrectly mounted on the skull or missing teeth have been added. All this makes proper identification challenging or at times impossible.

Panel 3 - Reified identities in scholarly practice

Phila Msimang (Department of Philosophy, Stellenbosch University)

Title: "The case against biological thinking about social group attribution in provenance research"

Abstract: Since the end of the human genome project and the invention of the "biogeographical ancestry" concept, there has been a resurgence of the biologization of social identities—especially those of the ethnic and racial variety. In this talk, I will discuss how the biologization of racial and ethnic identities makes biological assumptions about those human groups that do not hold. This way of thinking leads to misattributions and confusion about social group belonging in forensic contexts. This confusion goes well beyond the case of race and ethnic attribution but to how we think about community-level group belonging. Looking beyond the case of race and ethnicity, I suggest that the targets of the return of human remains should be based on social and political criteria rather than determined by the biological considerations we may need to make in our investigations.

Joanna Karolina Malinowska (Department of Philosophy and Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, Adam Mickiewicz University)

Title: "Do bones have races?"

Abstract: While there is a wide consensus within the scientific community regarding the social basis of ethnoracial classifications, many forensic anthropologists still rely on inheritable morphological features, such as cranial measurements, to determine the racial identity of human remains. In this regard, a question previously posed by Norman Sauer often resurfaces: "If races don't exist, why are forensic anthropologists so good at identifying them". In my talk, I will try to answer this question in relation to the criticism of the biologisation of ethnoracial categories?" In my presentation, I will endeavour to address this query in light of critiques against the biologisation of ethnoracial categories. Moreover, I will explore the differences between race and racialisation. I will contend that utilising the concept of racialisation, as opposed to race and ethnicity, can yield more accurate and insightful results. Lastly, I will briefly introduce a multileveled model that considers the different processes (epigenetical, neuronal, environmental, among others) affecting the racialisation of an individual.

Biographical Notes of the Panelists and Round Table Participants

Elisabeth Anstett

Elisabeth Anstett is a social anthropologist, research director at CNRS and member of UMR 7268 ADES (Anthropologie bio-culturelle, Droit, Ethique et Santé), an interdisciplinary research unit gathering researchers from social and medical sciences at the Faculty of Medical and Paramedical Sciences of Aix-Marseille University. Her research focuses on dead bodies and human remains management and care in mass violence or crisis contexts. She is co-editing the Human Remains and Violence book series and interdisciplinary full free Open Access academic journal at Manchester University Press.

Rainer Brömer

Rainer Brömer is a historian of life and health sciences who has also worked in the field of medical ethics in Exeter (UK), Mainz (D), and Istanbul (TR). One line of research interest is the ethics of gaining knowledge from living organisms and their remains. Currently, he is working in a project on "Agency and Ethics of Sensitive Objects in University Collections (AESOH)" funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), specifically dealing with wet specimens of human embryos in the medico-historical-anatomical collection of Marburg University.

Bruce Buchan

Bruce Buchan is a Professor of History in the School of Humanities, Languages, and Social Sciences at Griffith University. Buchan holds a PhD from the Australian National University. His research has been supported by Discovery grants and a Future Fellowship from the Australian Research Council, and co-funding (together with Andersson Burnett) from the Swedish Research Council and Riksbanken Jubileumsfond. He has been Invited Professor at École des hautes études en sciences sociales and at Copenhagen University. His books include *Piracies in World History* (2021); *Sound, Space and Civility in the British World, c. 1700-1850* (2018) and *An Intellectual History of Political Corruption* (2014), in addition to a number of articles on colonisation and empire.

Linda Andersson Burnett

Linda Andersson Burnett is an Associate Professor and Wallenberg Academy Fellow at the Department of History of Science and Ideas at Uppsala University in Sweden. She is the PI of the research program *Instructing Natural History: Nature, People, Empire*. She is the author of a number of articles on ethnographic thought, natural-history networks, travel writing and exhibition history and has collaborated extensively with Bruce Buchan with whom she has co-edited special issues of the *History of the Human Sciences* (32:4, 2019) and *Global Intellectual History* (currently in pre-print, 2022). Together with Buchan, she has also written *Racing Humanity: Education, Empire and Ethnography in Scotland's Global Enlightenment, c. 1770-1820*, which is under contract with Yale University Press.

Abigail Nieves Delgado

Abigail Nieves Delgado is assistant professor at the Freudenthal Institute at Utrecht University. Her research focuses on the history and philosophy of the life sciences and physical anthropology. Her

publications contribute to debates on racialization practices in the history of science as well as in contemporary biomedical research (e.g., in microbiome research and epigenetics) and in biometric technologies (e.g., facial recognition). Currently she is the principal investigator of the project “Microbiome research and race in the ‘Local South’”.

Nélia Dias

Nélia Dias is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology (ISCTE- Instituto Universitário de Lisboa | CRIA), Nélia Dias works in the fields of museum studies, history of anthropology, and critical heritage studies. She has published on physical anthropology collections in nineteenth-century France and her piece on human remains will be published in the Handbook of the History of Archaeology (Oxford University Press, 2023).

Birgit Großkopf

Birgit Großkopf studied biology in Göttingen and focused on anthropology. Her PhD at the University of Leipzig focused on the subject of cremations as biological and cultural-historical source material. At the University of Göttingen, she works as a research assistant mainly in the field of osteology and histology. She is also responsible for the large skeleton collection at the JFB Institute of Zoology and Anthropology. The Historical Anthropology Collection consists of various sub-collections, which form an essential basis for the teaching and research of the working group.

Richard Hölzl

Dr Richard Hölzl is a provenance researcher at the Museum Five Continents/Ethnographical Museum, Munich. He is affiliated to the Department of Medieval and Modern History at the University of Göttingen and the Rachel Carson Center at the Ludwig Maximilian University Munich. His research interests include the history of environmental movements and ecological transformations, the history of colonialism and Christian missions, and of colonial material culture.

Jonatan Kurzwelly

Jonatan Kurzwelly is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Göttingen (Germany) and a research fellow at the University of the Free State (South Africa). His research and writing explore different aspects of personal and social identities, essentialism, nationalism, radicalisation, identity politics, and various experimental and collaborative research methods. He serves as a convenor/chair of the Commission for the Study of Difference, Discrimination and Marginalisation (SDDM-IUAES).

Joanna Karolina Malinowska

The subject of my research is the broadly understood philosophy of science, with particular emphasis on the philosophy of medicine, the philosophy of neuroscience, the philosophy of psychology and the philosophy of biology. In my works I also ask questions regarding bioethics, epistemology, ontology and methodology.

I am interested in how some basic beliefs shared by scientific communities influence the development of science and society. I am currently working on a project on the conceptualisation and use of ethnoracial categories in medicine.

I published in journals such as: *Synthese*, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, *American Journal of Bioethics*, *Medicine Health Care and Philosophy*, *International Journal of Social Robotics and Minds and Machines*.

Phila M. Msimang

Phila M. Msimang is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at Stellenbosch University and the Secretary of the Azanian Philosophical Society. His research interests are mostly in the domains of the philosophy of biology and the philosophy of race. He is presently working with various research groups on the problems of race in and is a PhD candidate at Macquarie University. His most recent publications deal with the significance of population history to the human sciences and the uses and abuses of racial classifications in social and scientific settings.

Silke Schicktanz

Silke Schicktanz is Professor of Cultural and Ethical Studies of Biomedicine at the Institute of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine at the University Medical Center Göttingen. She completed her doctorate in 2002 at the University of Tübingen and started her professorship in Göttingen in 2010. Her research encompasses culturally comparative bio ethics, political ethics, ethics in dementia research, genomics, and artificial intelligence in medicine and care work. In 2022, she was elected president of the German Academy of Ethics in Medicine.

Martin Skrydstrup

Martin Skrydstrup completed his Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology at Columbia University in 2010 on questions of cultural property, pursued further in a postdoc on “dramas of repatriation.” He is associate professor of Globalization and Sustainability at the Copenhagen Business School since 2018. For the 2023-24 academic year, he is a visiting fellow at the Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies of Australian National University. Together with Valdimar Hafstein, he authored *Patrimonialities: Heritage vs. Property* (Cambridge, 2020).

Malin Sonja Wilckens

Malin Sonja Wilckens is a postdoc at the Leibniz Institute for European History in Mainz. Previously, she was a research assistant at the universities in Bielefeld and Kiel. She completed her Ph.D. as a fellow of the German Academic Scholarship Foundation, a Research Fellow at Stanford University, and an associate member of the SFB 1288 Practices of Comparing at Bielefeld University.

Team of the Göttingen University “Sensitive Provenances” Research Group and Affiliates

History: Rebekka Habermas, Holger Stoecker, Richard Hölzl

Anatomy: Katharina Stötzel, Christoph Viebahn, Michael Schultz

Historical Anthropology: Birgit Großkopf, Susanne Hummel

Cultural Anthropology: Regina F. Bendix, Jonatan Kurzwelly

Central Collections: Christian Vogel, Marie Louisa Allemeyer (until August, 2022)

Team Member abroad: Tarisi Vunidilo (Hilo Hawaii until 8/2023; Cal State L.A. 9/2023-)

Fellows:

Mikaél Assilkinga (Doctoral candidate, Technische Universität Berlin and University of Dschang)

Dr Te Herekie Herewini (Head of Repatriation of the Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme, Te Papa Tongarewa Museum)

McMichael Mutok (Registrar, Ministry of Human Resources, Culture, Tourism and Development, Republic of Palau)

Dr Maximilian Chami (Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, University of Dar es Salaam)

Alma Simba (Postgraduate student, University of Dar es Salaam)

Coordination support: Susanne Wiesenthal

Student Assistants:

Central Collections: Sophia Leikam, Chantal Stahl; History: Jan zum Mallen; Historical Anthropology: Emily Behlert, Leonie Koch; Cultural Anthropology: Lisa Baumann

Project Website: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/629688.html>

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