

Contesting Human Remains in Museum Collections: The Crisis of Cultural Authority
by Tiffany Jenkins

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As a contested issue, the treatment, display and retention of human remains in academic and museum contexts started in the 1970s in the United States and spread to the United Kingdom by the 1990s. In the US, the treatment of human remains was being protested against by a rising tide of indigenous activism that was incensed at the inherent racism in the different management accorded to remains; those considered European received reburial, while those considered Native American were curated, studied and often displayed. The situation in Britain developed differently and *Contesting Human Remains* attempts to address the means and manner of this divergence.

The author, Dr Tiffany Jenkins, is the director of the arts and society programme for the think tank Institute of Ideas, which pursues a libertarian, pro-science position labelled extreme and far-right by some critics (Sourcewatch 2010). Jenkins has also advocated against the repatriation of human remains in several opinion pieces (see <http://www.instituteofideas.com>). The central thesis of Jenkins's monograph is that, in contrast to the situation in the US where indigenous activist groups drove the debate, the issue was promulgated and advanced in the UK by museum professionals themselves. By seeking the repatriation and reburial of human

remains held by British museums, Jenkins asserts these museum professionals were attempting to challenge the 'cultural authority' of the very museums and institutions of which they were a part.

Jenkins frames her treatise in a well-structured, linear fashion. The first chapters outline how, through a combination of transmission of ideas from the US and the existence of museum professionals receptive to a change in paradigm, concerns about human remains held by archaeologists, anthropologists and museum professionals were collated and transformed into an issue for public debate. Jenkins also highlights the ways in which contemporary debates surrounding human remains – e.g. keeping the remains of children after autopsies without consent at Alder Hay and, in a case of extreme hyperbole, the behaviour of Nazi scientists – were used as corollaries by activists for the mistreatment by retention of human remains in museum contexts. By associating the repatriation issue with the wider debate concerning the general treatment of human remains in society, the scope of the repatriation/reburial movement began to expand to include all human remains curated in museum collections.

Jenkins then details the backlash against repatriation proponents by heritage stakeholders. These stakeholders framed their arguments around several key tenets: the scientific potential inherent in the human remains in collections, the possibility of new information obtainable through careful analysis, and the possibility of future knowledge as new techniques emerged. Scientists countered the charges of racism, imperialistic attitudes – and Nazi comparisons – by asserting the study of human remains helped change prevailing ideologies about race and ethnicity. However, opponents to repatriation had already lost out and the end of the chapter

exhaustively details the creation of several governmental working groups, multiple policy papers specifying the handling of human remains, and the establishment of legislation that licensed and controlled the handling of human remains.

The remaining chapters lay out the rest of Jenkins's evidence for her thesis: she argues that museums have been sites of cultural authority and legitimacy since their emergence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reinforcing the dominant ideology of their parent culture. Additionally, she asserts that external pressures – such as post-modernism and post-colonialism – have damaged this cultural authority, and led to a critical self-evaluation by participants from *within* the institutions. Chapter four, 'The Rise and Impact of Pagan Claims-Makers', handles the relationship between museums and Pagan groups claiming human remains for repatriation, and chapter five addresses why Jenkins believes human remains became such a focus for debate.

Lastly, the effect that the debate on human remains has had on their display and curation by museums is scrutinized by examining reactions to the manner of display of human remains in selected museums. A troubling point to raise is that while Jenkins asserts that the public is not disturbed by how human remains are displayed, she fails to address issues of why this should be a concern in and of itself, given the recent phenomenon of 'dark tourism'. Dark tourism is a growing trend that involves travelling to sites associated with death and suffering as well as viewing artefacts connected with death and the macabre – usually personified by human remains – in museum collections. Given the existence of this, museums have a duty of care to ensure a tasteful display (see Lennon & Foley 2000 and Sharpley & Stone 2009 for a fuller discussion of dark tourism).

The final section of the book presents a summary of the monograph's main points and Jenkins's conclusion. While somewhat hard to divine – Jenkins's own thoughts often get lost in her summary of what other authors think – Jenkins concludes that the role of museums within society is in peril because they have abrogated their authority. Additionally, she asserts that professionals within the establishment are destabilizing their own institutions by questioning the role of museums: a role that Jenkins seems to suggest should be as the arbitrators and dispensers of 'truth' and 'knowledge' for society.

As a source for the history of the human remains debate in Britain, *Contesting Human Remains* is excellent, neatly summing up its origins, major players, legislative actions and current state. Yet, there are several flaws that affect the monograph. Despite presenting her thesis as discussing 'Britain', she fails to address Scotland with anything other than a cursory mention and neglects to state if Scotland has comparable legislation or working groups to those she discusses in the context of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This will be exceedingly frustrating for researchers interested in the human remains debate and its narrative in Scotland. Additionally, the argument that a crisis of cultural authority was the cause and reason for the success of the repatriation movement is unconvincing, and never truly satisfactorily demonstrated, perhaps because the strict sociological approach is at times very narrow, with only cursory input from fields out with museology and sociology.

Consequently, the argument made by Jenkins remains troublingly Eurocentric, never addressing the roles of indigenous activists in the debate. Instead, it focuses exclusively on the 'issue entrepreneurs' that Jenkins claims are driving the debate. The only

attempt to address the perspective of those outside the museum industry is Jenkins's case study on Pagan groups, which is a troubling use of a straw man opponent. Furthermore, Jenkins is rough reading; at times, entire sections of the book feel stitched together from quotes and paraphrases of other authorities, leaving the reader feeling they are perusing a summary.

Finally, the most troubling aspect of Jenkins's work for me, as an anthropologist and archaeologist with experience working with the public and with human remains (both European and indigenous), is the main point with which she concludes her work and which she views as a crisis point; if museums have no cultural authority, then they are open to the influence of claim makers and outside influence and thus are in peril of being insolvent. This is an anathema; museums should exist *pro bono publica*, as a majority are funded from the public purse. If members of the public make a strong claim that indigenous remains should be repatriated then these public desires should be discussed and, if reasonable, met. There is always a middle ground between science and culture that can be walked, and *listening* to claims makers costs nothing and guarantees nothing.

Thus, Jenkins, while writing a thought-provoking work on the human remains debate in Britain, neglects a key point: archaeologists and museum curators have a duty of care for any human remains in their possession, to see that they, as the physical remnants of a once living breathing person, will be treated with respect and care, even if this means repatriation. Jenkins's work fails to provide a balanced approach to the issue, as it is quite clear that she believes firmly in the role of museums as cultural authorities which should have final and ultimate say over items in their collection. Her perspective is one that rejects cultural relativism, the lingering spectre of imperialism

that still haunts Western science and propagates a long rejected theoretical paradigm that holds science to be the ultimate arbitrator of truth, without acknowledging the issues of positivism or indeed the fact that 'science' as we understand it generally is a uniquely Western construct. Furthermore, her association with the Institute of Ideas – which rejects multiculturalism, environmentalism and political correctness (Institute of Ideas 2011) – raises troubling concerns over the objectiveness of her arguments. In that sense, this is not truly a book about human remains – as the title suggests – but one that uses the issue to examine critically what the author sees as a wider problem with museums and modern society. Ultimately, it provides a good starting point for those interested in the origins and legal aspects of the debate on human remains in Britain, but is wanting in terms of a balanced and nuanced discussion.

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