

Introduction

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The present volume collects the selected papers of the International Conference *The Great Laboratory of Humanity: Collection, Patrimony and the Repatriation of Human Remains* held in the University of Padua, from 30 May to 1 June 2016.

The conference aimed to address the acquisition, circulation and treatment of human remains, from the practices of colonial collecting and their monumentalizing use in the epoch of nation-building, until the present-day repatriation movement instigated by Indigenous communities. This broad temporal perspective provides a larger scale of analysis of the different processes of empowering human remains through the historical inversion of the symmetrical relationship between scientific objectification and political sacralization. Though local contexts of power relations and competing cultural models are embedded within any contestation over human remains held in museum collections, it is possible to explore the global framework of the processes of *patrimonialisation* in the postcolonial world.

In the nineteenth century, the rise of the paradigm of race increased the interest of scientists in measuring and comparing human skeletons, and especially skulls, to investigate the origin of humanity and classify the biological diversity of people all over the world. Western global domination served the purpose of enhancing the collecting of human remains. Stolen from burial places or battle camps, and often acquired through commercial transactions, those remains were transformed into anthropological evidence. Museums and academic institutions asserted their ownership rights by proclaiming the universalist value of the “evidence-bodies” held in the scientific laboratory of humankind. At the same time, in the political laboratory of Western states, the remains of “Fathers of Nations” were being transformed into sacred “monument-bodies” as a result of eighteenth- and nineteenth-cen-

ture European secular religion. From the *panthéonisation* of the “Western big men” during the French Revolution to the thanato-politics of Italian nation-building—a secular version of the Catholic cult of relics—and the coeval creation of anatomical collections by scientific institutions, the dual process of *patrimonialisation* of “evidence-bodies” and “monument-bodies” appears to maintain its symbolic strength within the contemporary cultural politics around human remains.

In the postcolonial era, the political agenda changed in the nations of the former “white settler” territories in the face of the affirmative actions of Indigenous people campaigning for the return of ancestral remains housed in Western institutions. Human remains have become the site of a symbolic fight, the flash point of the material evidence of colonial violence as well as the “body-of-proof” of science’s false neutrality. In 1990, after a thirty-year battle by American Indian activists, the US federal law NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) was enacted to remedy long-standing claims for the repatriation, burial and protection of ancestors’ remains. NAGPRA is a unique legislation rooted in the US history of internal colonization and of systematic excavations of burials for archeological research, but its enactment had a profound impact on museum policies in many Western countries. Now there are repatriation requests from Australia, Oceania, Africa and in some case also from subaltern communities or “ethnic” and religious minorities in Europe.

As demands for restitution have increased over the past decades, many museums have enacted internal guidelines for the care of collections of human remains and are developing innovative approaches towards practices of repatriation. The United Kingdom established a *Ministerial Working Group on Human Remains* and, in 2004, an amendment to the *Human Tissue Act* provided museums with a legal framework for responding to repatriation requests. Over the past decade, many international conferences and seminars have addressed this hotly debated topic, one that involves confronting ethical dilemmas and the political consequences of an enduring crisis in the authority of scientific knowledge. These are typified by the mutual accusations hurled between pro- and anti-repatriation scholars.

Many international conferences in Europe pointed to the growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship on the issues pertaining to the past and present treatment of human remains in museums and academic institutions:

Human Remains and Museum Practice (Museum of London, 2004), *Respect for Ancient British Human Remains* (Manchester Museum, 2006), *Des*

collections anatomiques aux objets de culte: Conservation et exposition des restes humains dans les musées (Musée du Quai Branly, Paris 2010), *Conference on Restitutions on Human Remains* (Foundation for Art-Law and Art-Law Center, Geneva 2010), the seminar *Human Remains and the Law* (Institute of Art and Law and the Natural History Museum, London 2013), as well as the seminar *Corpses, Cadavers and Catalogues: The Mobilities of Dead Bodies and Body Parts, Past and Present* (Queen Mary University of London, Royal College of Surgeons, School of Geography and the Environment, London 2016) are definitive examples of the effort to engage museum professionals and academics in a thorough discussion on the legacy of the past, on the shifting meaning of human remains' power and agency, on their increasing research potential in the globalised world.

The Italian scholars are late in joining this huge international debate, though since 2007 the Museum of Natural History in Florence and the Pigorini Museum in Rome are involved in ongoing repatriation requests from the Australian Government for the return of Aboriginal remains. In 2010, a joint committee of the National Association of Scientific Museums (ANMS) and of the Italian Anthropological Association (AAI, Association of bio-anthropologists) drew up a document to explain reasons for refusing to comply with the requests. However, the examination of disputed questions and challenges raised by the impact of repatriation movement went on in the confined area of the two associations.

The conference “Oggetti ambasciatori: riflessioni sulla patrimonializzazione condivisa” (University of Verona, 2010) —organised by Anna Paini, Matteo Aria and Mariaclaudia Cristofano—sought to open the debate on critical aspects of the universalist notion of cultural patrimony and the creative experiences of collaboration between Indigenous communities and museums, without mentioning the controversial topic of human remains.

The *Great Laboratory of Humanity* was the first multidisciplinary attempt to approach this multifaceted and highly divisive topic. The project of the conference was the outcome of the ongoing conversations between myself, a cultural anthropologist, Silvano Montaldo, historian and director of the Museum of Criminal anthropology “Cesare Lombroso” and the bio-anthropologists members of the Museum staff: Giacomo Giacobini, also director of the Museum of Anatomy and past president of the National Association of Scientific Museum (ANMS), Cristina Cilli, curator of the museum, Giancarla Malerba and Gianluigi Mangiapane. All of us in different way have been concretely involved in the internal request of repatriation of the Giuseppe Villella's skull which is exhibited as “scientific relic” of Criminal

anthropology in the new display of the Lombroso Museum in Turin (2009). Unlike the Australian demand for repatriation of the ancestral remains, almost ignored by the Italian press, the internal case of the Vilella's skull has political implications which are repeatedly amplified through the media.

We felt the call to face the challenge of an open even heated scientific debate, the urge to promote a deepening reflection with the aim of improving dialogue within and between different perspectives. The collaboration with the Center of Cultural history directed by Carlotta Sorba and the adhesion of the philosopher of science Telmo Pievani made the project more ambitious. We extended the invitation to attend the scientific proposal of the conference to Ambrogio Fassina and Gaetano Thiene who represent the heritage of the prestigious Medical School of the University of Padua.

The volume at hand has been organized in two parts to highlight the multidisciplinary contributions of the scholars involved in comparing different case studies and research experiences on human remains through different geopolitical spaces and historical temporalities. Jean-Loop Amselle opens the essays' collection by approaching as an anthropologist the theme of overlapping museum histories and its contemporary relation to "exotic otherness." Amselle's conclusive reflections invite to consider museum's key role in representing identities and memories and the consequent risk to generate controversy with those "who consider themselves heirs and entitled beneficiaries" of identities and memories.

The following first part brings together eight essays that focus on the collection and treatment of dead bodies as scientific evidences, sacred relics, artistic objects, and as monuments of national identity.

The historian of medicine Fabio Zampieri offers an overview of the naissance of medical museology in Europe. From the *Wunderkammer* to the modern museum, the author focuses on the developments of the more refined techniques used to preserve the anatomical specimens. This look at the primary role of medical tradition in the process of transformation of dead bodies highlights the deep-rooted cultural construction of the scientists acceptance of collecting and displaying human remains. In the same historical vein Alberto Zanatta's essay introduces exemplar figures from Padua Medical School who, since the XVIII century, contributed to create the patrimony of the anatomical museums. Particular attention deserves Lodovico Brunetti's treatment of the dead body of a young woman, *La suicida punita*. This shocking anatomical artifact which was exhibited in the 1867 Paris Universal Exposition provides an emblematic evidence of different sensibilities toward the dead through historical and social contexts.

Nicola Carrara looks at “the strange case of Petrarca’s skull,” that is a good way to discover how prominent anthropologists as Giovanni Canestrini (the first Italian translator of *Origin of Species*), in the end of nineteenth century, applied their expertise to reconstruct the physical and phrenological profile of illustrious ancestors who were summoned from the past to represent the antiquity of Italian identity. At the same epoch, the positivist turn in European science determined the materialist attitude of scientists toward their own dead bodies. Departing from the naissance in France of Society of Mutual Autopsy, that challenged the millennial dominion of Catholic religion over the after-death treatment of the bodies, Silvano Montaldo addresses “the practice of donating one’s body to science and for public display.” The skeletons and body parts of Cesare Lombroso and Carlo Giacomini exhibited in their museums in Turin reflect the scientists’ will to affirm their absolute participation in the ethical mission of science. In the chapter that follows, Silvia Cavicchioli focuses on the political uses of human remains in the process of nation building by illustrating the practices of exhumation and translation of the bodies of heroes and martyrs who had fought for the Risorgimento.

In chapters 6 and 7, Francesca Sbardella and Helga Sanità engage with the devotional treatment of human remains in two very different contexts of the Catholic cult of relics. Sbardella offers a fascinating insight into the fabric of Saints in French and Italian monasteries where the nuns are specialized in processing holy remains. Sanità writes about the famous Neapolitan cemetery of the *Fontanelle*, the tuff cave where rest some 40,000 remains, skulls and bones of unidentified persons who became the sacred relics of the local cult of the souls of Purgatory. As the musealization of the site, since 2010, shifted the symbolic status of dead’s remains from sacred relics to “admirable objects,” Sanità pursues the analysis of this processes of signification which are never fixed but fluid and opened to change through the interaction with secular or religious tourists, or with artistic performances.

The last contribution of the first part is dedicated to the history of Horatio Gordon Robley’s collection of preserved Maori heads that became wanted items of gruesome exoticism for the first European settlers in New Zealand. Roger Blackley reconstructs all the vicissitude of the obsessive “head-hunter’s collection” until the 2014 when the American Museum of Natural History repatriated it to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

The second part of this volume examines some repatriation cases and related controversies that offer arguments of conversation amongst the different contributors. Kathleen Fine-Dare draws an introduction to the Native

American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, the U.S. federal law approved in 1990 after decades of struggle for the right to bring back to their original communities the human remains and the associated objects that are housed in federal museum institutions. Fine-Dare's contribution further engages with the repatriation case of Kennewick man—the “Ancient One” that the DNA test in 2016 established to be affiliated with five tribal Nations in the Northwest—and she reflects on the opportunity to enrich the debate with “comparative historical and cultural studies of repatriation.”

Chapter 2, 3 and 4 examine cases that have in common the fact of being internal restitution claims in European nations. Maria Teresa Milicia writes about the Italian controversy concerned the skull of the southern “brigand” Vilella who is still exhibited at Cesare Lombroso museum in Turin. Adriano Favole, Emmanuel Kasarérhou and Anna Paini analyze the case of the Great Chief Atai remains that were repatriated to New Caledonia—the French overseas territory—from the Musée de l'Homme in 2015. Their essay shifts the emphasis on the consequences of restitution, arguing that it is “the period to which we should pay close attention.” Fenneke Sysling illustrates the Netherlands cases of dead's remains restitution to the communities of Schokland and Urk in the Zuiderzee.

Chapter 5, 6 and 7 focus on the repatriation processes in Australia, emphasizing different historical, political and scientific key issues. Franca Tamisari scrutinizes “the main paradox” of the repatriation process that, in her view, “has increased rather than eliminated the discriminatory power of the Australian state” toward Indigenous peoples. Paul Turnbull deepens the historical focus on scientific collecting of Indigenous dead and takes an open stand against museum institutions that refuse to consider the religious and cultural value of the repatriation. Turnbull challenges the main arguments of the ANMS against the request of repatriation of the Indigenous remains stored in Italian museums.

The contribute of Claudio Tuniz provides a scientific insight of the state of art on the advanced tools and methods that have revolutionised human origin studies. By engaging in conversation with Turnbull, Tuniz emphasizes the value of human remains as humankind patrimony while fostering the reconciliation of the Indigenous rights with the scientific effort to improve universal knowledge. In chapter 8, Alberto Garlandini writes about the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museum and the ethical care, interpretation and exhibition of human remains. Garlandini outlines the important role that the ICOM Code of Ethics can play in the administration of collections of human remains and in the assessment of legal cases, as was for ICOM

Italia's intervention in the legal case of the exhibition of human remains conserved in the Museum of Criminal Anthropology Cesare Lombroso. In the last chapter of the volume Giovanni Pinna summarizes the history of the movements for the indigenous rights and the growing of collaborative museology as the outcome of decolonization process after the 1960s. Pinna presided the Committee instated by ANMS that ruled against the request of repatriation of the Australian human remains from the collection of the Anthropological Museum of Florence. The key issue of this conclusive chapter concerns the "feeling of guilty of the Western States" for the colonial past which prevents from supporting the reasons to preserve the patrimony of scientific collections.

While this volume does not pretend to reconcile positions so distant from each other nor to be exhaustive of all controversial issues, we do hope that it will provide both an encouragement of further conversations between cultural and biological scholars, and a call for the Italian scientific community to engage the international debate.