

“A Universe of Stolen Things”: Indigenous Rematriation Fictions and Museum Biocolonialism

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The Hopi/Miwok poet and anthropologist Wendy Rose begins her 1980 poem, “Three Thousand Dollar Death Song”, with an epigraph from an *“invoice received at a museum as normal business, 1975”* itemizing *“Nineteen American Indian skeletons from Nevada... valued at \$3,000”* (20, original emphasis). Narrated by these skeletons, the poem ends with an alternative inventory, this time listing the incalculable losses wrought on Indigenous communities by the markets that place value on their bodies and resources:

clam-shell beads and steatite, dentalia
and woodpecker scalp, turquoise and copper,
blood and oil, coal and uranium,
children, a universe
of stolen things. (21)

The museum, the poem demonstrates, is complicit in this milieu of colonial theft, a site where Indigenous people’s bones are not only commodified – bought, sold, and “valued” (20) – but are also handled without care:

removed and tossed about,
cataloged, numbered with black ink
on newly-white foreheads.
As we were formed to the white soldier’s voice,
so we explode under white students’ hands. (20)

This handling by curators, scientists and students is profoundly objectifying – “one century has turned / our dead into specimens” (21) – and on one level the poem functions as a lament for Indigenous loss. But although the “nineteenth-century enthusiasm for bone-collecting”

was driven in part by salvage anthropologists' belief in the "anticipated imminent extinction of native peoples" (Collingwood-Whittick 74), the acts of theft and abuse exposed in this poem are not ultimately successful in consigning Native American communities to the past, to a state of "having-been" (Rose 21). The museum's "specimens" and artefacts possess vitality – life-force – and agency; the skeleton speaker commands the reader to "Picture the mortars, the arrowheads, the labrets / shaking off their labels" and watch them "march out the museum door!" while the "bones rise / to meet them and mount the horses once again!" (21). There is a sense here of impending reckoning, as "[t]he cost will then be paid" (21) for this history of extraction and theft.

I begin with "Three Thousand Dollar Death Song" because the image of an uprising of agentful bones and objects is emblematic of a series of late 20th and 21st-century creative texts by Indigenous writers and filmmakers around the globe that I term "rematriation fictions".¹ These are works of fiction, poetry, drama, and film, encompassing multiple genres from ghost stories and trickster narratives to thrillers and farce, in which museums holding Indigenous remains or sacred treasures function as important settings, inform pertinent plot points, or stoke the narrative's ethical explorations. Like Rose's poem, all of these texts emphasize how "our dead" – beloved ancestors or kin – may be reduced to scientific "specimens" by processes of display, storage, and research. They are all concerned with the politics, ethics, spiritual resonances and practicalities of returning treasures to their source communities, although – importantly – none of the texts I consider under this rubric actually represents an instance of full, official or satisfactory repatriation of Indigenous ancestors or belongings to their homelands (repatriation being the international legal term, and policy framework, for the return of stolen treasures). Instead, we find in these texts acts of partial or not-quite repatriation; alternative and improvised ceremonies of return or guardianship; escapes, as in Rose's poem; symbolic acts of "de-collecting", to use Barbara Bruce's term, or

“undoing” colonialist thefts (205n3);² and subversive (sometimes illegal) gestures of rescue that circumvent museum protocols – or indeed expose the futility or bias of such procedures. Bones are smuggled out of museums and returned to their ancestral lands in many repatriation fictions, including Hawaiian-Samoan playwright Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl’s *Ola Nā Iwi (The Bones Live)* (1994), Ojibway writer Drew Hayden Taylor’s *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass* (2010), and Cherokee novelist Thomas King’s *Truth and Bright Water* (1999), but whether or not an act of return is realized, repatriation fictions explore a range of possibilities for the appropriate and meaningful care of ancestors and treasures. They also offer critical engagements with formal repatriation discourses and practices – practices that, as many texts testify, are often inadequate or damaging.

In this article I shall use the term repatriation to refer to the legally authorized processes, led by cultural heritage institutions, for returning Indigenous ancestors or belongings to their communities, while repatriation references Indigenous-centred notions of homecoming and reconnection with land and community. I choose not to term the texts in question *repatriation* fictions due to significant Indigenous ideological objections to the conceptualization of “repatriation”. Etymologically derived from the Latin “patria” (fatherland), repatriation works within “a framework of the nation that is conceptualized in patriarchal terms” (Rassool and Gibbon 2 of 4) and “reify[ies] heteropatriarchal dominance” (Tuck 35). Sociologist Robin R. R. Gray (Ts’misye/Mikisew Cree) contends that “[r]epatriation must be understood as a legal concept rife with colonial baggage that develops from Euro-Western ideas about nationhood, personhood, property, and ownership” (16), meaning that paternalist and “colonial logics and legalities” are inevitably “embedded in repatriation processes” (2-3) as they are coded in museum policies and protocols. As such, its critics asserts, the framework of repatriation “does not” – or cannot fully – “fulfill the needs and requirements of restorative justice” (Rassool and Gibbon 3 of 4).

My intention here is not to suggest, reductively, that repatriation initiatives are uniformly problematic, inadequate, or uninformed by the wishes and priorities of the Indigenous communities involved. Indeed, as Trude Fonneland and Rossella Ragazzi assert with reference to the formal repatriation of Sámi artefacts, “[r]epatriation is a sign of change” and, crucially, it requires “the museum [to] reflect upon, recognize, and acknowledge the contemporary imbalance in power relationships at play in the cultural heritage sector” (2, 3). In this sense, the introduction of national repatriation policies in former settler colonies represents a significant act of recognition regarding Indigenous rights to their ancestors and belongings.³ But even where such policy does exist, there are multiple barriers to successful repatriations, including in some cases non-compliance or active resistance from museums (see Dumont). One of the failings of the 1990 US Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), for instance, is “its general lack of procedures for repatriating so-called ‘unaffiliated’ remains” (Justice 127), and, as Cherokee literary critic Daniel Heath Justice reminds us, identifiable remains constitute only a “small fraction” of the “more than fifty thousand Indigenous dead remaining in universities and museums in the United States alone” (125).⁴ The fate of such unknown – unrepatriatable – ancestors is a driving concern in many rematriation fictions: Pawnee Otoe-Missouria writer Anna Lee Walters’ pre-NAGPRA novel *Ghost Singer* (1988), for instance, centers on the distressed, enraged and uncared-for spirits of unidentified Indigenous people whose remains are held in storage in the Natural History Building of the Smithsonian Institution.

Reading literary and film texts as *rematriation* fictions aligns them with current Indigenous mobilizations of rematriation as an alternative concept, “grounded in Indigenous law” (Gray 3) and native matrilineal paradigms, which for many Indigenous communities constitutes “the desired pathway for return” (Gray 16). Rematriation emphasizes sacred relationships between Indigenous communities, their ancestral lands and environments,

placing “the focus on Mother Earth as the home to which Native remains and cultural objects should be returned” (Herrighty and Hill 1009).⁵ When applied to stolen treasures, it refers to a deeper process than the institution-led act of repatriation, “a process that combines narratives, memories, meanings, and emotions that are intertwined with these [returned] objects today” (Harlin). As an often-quoted definition explains,

By “rematriate” we mean “give back,” but unlike the legal term “repatriate,” which signifies a simple transfer of ownership, “rematriate” means something more profound: a restoration of right relationships and a true action of decolonization, aimed not just at righting a past wrong but transforming our collective future. (Thunder Bay Library Rematriation Project)

As I will show, rematriation fictions all foreground Indigenous models of agency, ownership and ethics with precisely this focus on “right relationships” and the “collective future”. As such, they are not fictional versions of what archaeologist and curator Dan Hicks calls “necrographies” or “death-histories” (xiv) – histories of colonial looting, killing and loss embodied in museum objects – even while they may include stories of violent acquisition and cultural trauma.⁶ Rather, as Justice emphasizes, writers whose work is concerned with “the besieged state of the Indigenous dead” (he is discussing Wendy Rose here) “take up the question of the dead as ancestors *with continuing relationships with the living*” (124, original emphasis). It is these continuing relationships, in the present and into the future, that underpin the ethical concerns of rematriation fictions.

In this article, I focus on two important rematriation fictions produced in the 1990s, a decade of significant developments in international repatriation policy and legislation: Thomas King’s *Truth and Bright Water* (1999) and the film *Te Rua* (1991), written and directed by Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay. My readings of these texts, set on the US-Canadian border and in Aotearoa New Zealand respectively, will reveal their shared set of

concerns regarding the treatment of Indigenous ancestors in museums and their anticipatory relationship to current repatriation frameworks. The first section of the article puts repatriation discourse in dialogue with Indigenous critiques of biocolonialism, a term most often applied to “the removal, processing, conversion into private property, and commodification of indigenous genetic resources by agents of the dominant culture(s)” (Whitt 23). Building on the parallels drawn by many Indigenous commentators between the extractive scientific treatment of Indigenous DNA and the dehumanizing treatment of Indigenous artefacts in museums, I historicize repatriation fictions’ critique of extractive research, practices of acquisition and display, and the formal repatriation processes available at their time of writing. My analysis of *Truth and Bright Water* focuses on King’s incisive exploration of the value and disposability of Indigenous lives and bodily matter, triangulating the connections made in the novel between the storage of Indigenous bones in museums, the disposal of medical waste, and the extraction of Indigenous DNA during the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP).⁷ I then discuss how *Te Rua* introduces concepts of “spiritual guardianship” and “conscientious curation” that trouble museum discourses about the ownership and care of stolen treasures, and advocates for Indigenous self-determination in setting the conditions for their return or alternative routes to the restoration of right relationships. While Barclay and King both respond to their contemporary climate regarding repatriation policies and practices, it is important to recognize how these 1990s texts are prescient – visionary, even – rather than simply reactive. In critiquing emerging biocolonial and repatriation initiatives from their inception, they anticipated much current repatriation discourse by centralizing Indigenous-led care practices and modes of return and conceptualizing more rigorous ethical imperatives for the treatment of Indigenous bodies, treasures, and remains. King, Barclay and many other Indigenous writers and filmmakers

imagine ethical frameworks for repatriation and the treatment of artefacts that invite us to care for the ancestors in ways that affirm their Indigenous communities in the present day.

Bone Courts and Museum Biocolonialism

In December 2018, a study published in *Science Advances* announced that genomic biotechnology – the agent of so much biocolonial damage (Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism) – could soon be used to identify and return ancient Indigenous remains held in museums to their rightful communities (Wright et al.).⁸ Researchers from Griffith University, Australia, working collaboratively with Aboriginal Traditional Owners and their communities, had successfully matched DNA from pre-European Aboriginal ancestral remains of known provenance with the genomes of contemporary Aboriginal inhabitants from the same geographical locations and local language groups. Having established the accuracy of nuclear DNA testing techniques in identifying the known geographic origins of these ancestors, the researchers concluded that methods could be developed to “reliably repatriate ancient unprovenanced remains to the correct Place and Country” (Wright et al. 6 of 12).

There is a sense of justice in the fact that genetic science might be redirected into new work bringing Indigenous ancestors home to rest, given the histories of Indigenous exploitation associated with population genetics initiatives including the HGDP, as I shall go on to discuss, and the Genographic Project, as well as multiple other abuses of Indigenous DNA and blood samples in what Joanna Radin calls the “frozen archive” (Radin 171).⁹ While in recent years we have begun to see a shift in the power balance and working relations between Indigenous and scientific communities,¹⁰ as anthropologist Deanne Hanchant-Nichols (Tanganekald/Barkindji) puts it: “For many, many years, science kept us out. We had no role in museums other than for them to steal our stories, steal our artefacts and steal our

bones” (Phillips). Boris Jardine, Emma Kowal and Jenny Bangham insist that “the museum and the lab are entangled” in multiple ways, including by the movement of objects between these sites (18) – as is happening with Indigenous remains now tested for ancient DNA – and it is because of this entangled legacy between genomic science and museum collections that I assert that the acquisition and storage of Indigenous ancestral remains and treasures in museums, and processes for the repatriation of ancestors, are practices that can usefully be considered under the rubric of biocolonialism. While the term was developed in relation to genetic science and biotechnology specifically (IPCB *Indigenous Peoples, Genes and Genetics*), most Indigenous commentators on biocolonial activity stress the similarities between current scientific methods and the extractive colonial practices of previous generations. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, argued in 1993 that the collection and storage of Indigenous DNA in “cold laboratories” for use in the HGDP “is just a more sophisticated version of how the remains of our ancestors are collected and stored in museums and scientific institutions” (26). Justice similarly identifies “a continuity in Indigenous experience across time and space” whether the target is “bones, genes, [or] blood” and “whether belonging to the dead or the living” (131). The kinds of scientific intervention referenced in Rose’s poem, as well as the sampling and analysis of ancient or contemporary DNA, may be experienced as ontological violation for some communities: as a representative of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre explained in 2007, when some ancestors were returned home from London’s Natural History Museum, “we have been telling the Museum for over thirty years that physical interference of any kind with our dead is an absolute violation of Aboriginal spiritual beliefs and we are completely opposed to any form of it” (Carolyn Smallwood, qtd. in Rimmer 371). So although, as Kowal argues, it would be reductive to “essentialize contemporary [genome] science as simply a continuation” (8) of the nineteenth-century racial science that drove many

colonialist museum acquisition practices, my conceptualization of “museum biocolonialism” in this article refers to a colonialist approach to bodily matter or life-force and is guided by the continuities explicitly referenced by many Indigenous commentators.

Museum collections of Indigenous ancestral remains, by this reckoning, are a precursor to contemporary genomic biocolonialism and share its extractivist logic. In the museum and the lab, Indigenous bodies may be mined for genetic data or historical information and then treated as disposable: in the case of museums, human remains are often hidden away in boxes or on storeroom shelves (as in *Ghost Singer* and, as we shall see, in *Truth and Bright Water*), never fully at rest but existing in suspension as “time-traveling resources” (Radin xii) that may be reanimated by future scientific techniques. Pauline Wakeham describes this enactment of power over temporality and animacy as “the semiotics of taxidermy” (17) and identifies it in both the genetics lab and the museum: it constitutes “the strategic management of the categories of ‘life’ and ‘death’ and of ‘preservation’ and ‘extinction’” (18) and involves “the manipulation of temporality, the recategorization of bodily matter as specimen sample, and the preoccupation with reproducing bodies in the preserved form of artificial life” (194).

The categorization of life and death, ancestor and specimen, along with these questions of animation and time travel, are at the heart of most repatriation fictions – many of which are, to some extent, ghost stories that feature the dead as agentful characters whose actions affect relationships in the present and future. Whether the texts focus on human remains (as in *Truth and Bright Water*) or Indigenous artefacts (as in *Te Rua*), each addresses a recurring failure within western museums and scientific institutions to recognize the life-force or spirit of ancestral remains and, indeed, sacred objects. Lisa Sullivan points out that in “much of the discussion surrounding repatriation within scientific and museum communities [...] human remains are either specimens or ancestors, incommensurable positions, one of

which must ultimately triumph over the other” (291-92). But in texts emerging from what Kim TallBear calls “indigenous metaphysic[s]”, according to which “matter is lively” (“Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary” 199) and the “intimate knowing relatedness of all things” (191) is fundamental, the life-force, agency and ancestral status of so-called artefacts is never in question,¹¹ and the dissonance between this liveliness and museum policies regarding the collection, display, storage, disposal and/or repatriation of bones or objects is a foundational aspect of the issues at stake. As the ghostly character Nanea explains in *Ola Nā Iwi*, “[w]e believe that the spirit, the essence, the mana (*spiritual power*) resides in the bones. If not properly hidden or cared for in the old way, the spirit of the departed one is forced to wander, unhappy and restless” (Kneubuhl 175).¹² And in Laguna Pueblo novelist Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), it is an act of epistemic violence when two stone figures stolen from the Laguna people and housed in a Santa Fe museum are described as “‘lithic’ objects” (33) by the museum’s assistant curator. “[N]ot merely carved stones”, the novel asserts, “these were *beings* formed by the hands of the kachina spirits” (33), “esteemed and beloved ancestors” (31) whose theft causes anguish to the Laguna community and whose display in a glass case, “lying dreadfully unwrapped” (33), is a violation of the painstaking “protection and care” (31) they have received from “[g]eneration after generation” (31) of descendants before their theft.

Such failures to recognize the life-force of nonhuman treasures make it strategic to identify the collection of *both* human remains *and* sacred belongings as a form of *biocolonialism* – an extractive approach to life itself akin to the mining of DNA in the laboratory. Indeed, the assertion of artefacts’ life-force is a crucial stage in communities’ repatriation claims to museums, as Margaret Werry asserts:

most cases of repatriation of indigenous entities begin by extracting them from the regime of objecthood to which the museological apparatus of Western

modernity consigns them – in which the object is inert, indifferent, passive, dumb, ineffective, ‘natural’ matter, and thus available as property – and reinstating them as participants in social collectives, inalienably bound to the living by relations of reciprocity and responsibility. Repatriation, then, originates in the reconstrual of the repatriatable as a subject rather than an object of knowledge. (83-84)

Rematriation fictions share this understanding of bones or ancestral objects as “protagonists” (Werry 84) in the drama that unfolds, as subjects of knowledge, ancestors, and social beings who continue to exist in intimate and vital relations with the living. So even when, in these fictions, the physical return of the Indigenous entity does not occur or is not an option (as in *Te Rua*, as I shall discuss), the texts create the necessary ontological and ethical conditions for rematriation: recognition of the entity’s life-force, affirmation of its relationships with land and community, and frameworks and practices for its appropriate care.

As such, we might understand rematriation narratives as fictional performances of what Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor, writing in 1986, termed “Bone Courts”.¹³ His “modest proposal” (radical at that time) was that a new forum be established that “would have federal judicial power to hear and decide disputes over burial sites, research on bones, reburial, and to protect the rights of tribal bones to be represented in court” (63). Vizenor’s proposal is underpinned by an understanding of bones as “mediators and narrators” (65) – akin to Werry’s “protagonists” – who possess rights, an argument “based on the premise that human rights continue at death” (63). The Bone Courts, he submits, “would ‘act as if’ tribal bones had rights to their own narratives” (66) and to legal representation – just as, he notes, other inanimate entities like corporations have.¹⁴ Rematriation fictions do just this: give tribal bones and sacred objects rights as persons and as Indigenous community members, expose the insufficiency of settler law for dealing with matters of life and death, and endow

their subjects with narrative – if not legal – (self-)representation.¹⁵ In the analysis of *Truth and Bright Water* and *Te Rua* that follows, I show how these texts present Indigenous bones and sacred carvings respectively as protagonists with a continuing life-force, whose right to be laid to rest rather than boxed away in museum storerooms drives the action of living Indigenous characters. In both texts, historical and bureaucratic obstacles prevent the physical return of these entities to their ancestral lands, but alternative forms of repatriation are nevertheless achieved: in *Truth and Bright Water*, the bones of unidentified Indigenous children are brought into relation with contemporary Indigenous subjects and are received by the river flowing between the US-Canadian border, while in *Te Rua*, spiritual guardianship of three stolen carvings (or custodianship of their life-force) is returned to their ancestral community even while the physical carvings remain in a Berlin museum. My reading of the museum practices in these texts as a mode of biocolonialism – the mistreatment of life itself – is a reframing that stresses how “each museum object is an unfinished event” (Hicks 231): rather than desecrations from the colonial past, these texts present museum holdings as ongoing violations of the life-force and relationships of Indigenous protagonists.

“A long ways from home”: Rematriation and Rescue in *Truth and Bright Water*

Of the rematriation fictions discussed in this article, Thomas King’s *Truth and Bright Water* (1999) is the text that interrogates most directly the connections between post-NAGPRA repatriation practices, the material treatment of “unaffiliated” Indigenous remains, and concerns about extractivist genetic research. The narrative of rematriation is explicit in a central storyline in which the teenage protagonist Tecumseh and his cousin Lum find a human skull washed up from the river that runs along the US-Canadian border. The mystery of the skull’s origins and how it came to be in the river, as well as considerations about its care, form the driving force of the narrative. But, as I shall discuss, the novel also registers

concerns about the Human Genome Diversity Project and about the wider treatment and disposal of human biological materials. Different strands of the narrative intertwine around concerns about the material violence of extractivist practices, the transformation of body (or ancestor) into specimen or commodity, and the complication of categories of life and death that such practices entail.

Tecumseh's dog Soldier finds the small human skull after Tecumseh and Lum witness an unidentifiable figure dancing to music on a cliff, emptying the contents of a suitcase into the river, and diving in afterwards. The mystery of who this person is unfolds through the novel, until it eventually transpires that the ironically self-defined "famous Indian artist" (King 45) Monroe Swimmer has thrown this skull and a boxful of others into the river in an improvised ritual of rematriation – of return to the land. Monroe has made a career in the restoration of nineteenth-century landscape paintings in international art collections but is repeatedly fired for his habit of "paint[ing ...] the Indians back into the painting[s]" (133). In a further subversive act, he tells Tecumseh, over a number of years he has made a project of "collect[ing]" (250) Indigenous bones from metropolitan museums:

"I stole them from lots of museums. Toronto. New York. Paris. London.

Berlin. You name the museum, I've probably been there. [...]

Children. [...] I found them in drawers and boxes and stuck away on dusty shelves. Indian children. [...] Happens all the time [...] Anthropologists and archaeologists dig the kids up, clean them off, and stick them in drawers.

Every ten years or so, some bright graduate student opens the drawer, takes a look, writes a paper, and shuts the drawer. [...] So I rescued them." (250-51)

This language of "rescue" is significant as an alternative to the discourse of "salvage" that formed an historical justification for collecting Indigenous remains. Wakeham explains how

anthropologists legitimated grave robbing and the expropriation of Aboriginal cultural belongings in the name of salvaging remnants of a vanishing race. The rubric of ‘rescue’ paradoxically constituted yet another way to inscribe, to spectacularize, and to materially hasten the death of [...] natives. (21)

By this logic, “salvaged” remains and objects were “rescued” from their resting places for the sake of posterity and the advancement of scientific knowledge, not at all for the benefit of the communities they belong to. Monroe’s acts of “rescue” treat “the kids” as captured children, vital, deserving of justice and a different future – as in Vizenor’s bone courts.

Monroe invents a makeshift ceremony for returning the bones to the land, tying red ribbons around the skulls, dancing, and “putting the bones in the river” (King 251). For Justice and other critics, this scene is deeply “troubling” (131). These bones are unaffiliated – nobody knows where they are actually from – and Tecumseh’s wise grandmother declares that the skull “wasn’t from around here [...]. She’s a long ways from home” (King 160). With subtle references to the 1830s Trail of Tears, King intimates that the skull may belong to Rebecca Neugin, the strange Cherokee girl from Georgia ostensibly visiting for the Indian Days festival, whose dress “looks a little old-fashioned” (101), whose “long thick hair [is] tied back with a red ribbon” and who, “in the light, [...] looks strange, pale and transparent” (102).¹⁶ Whether or not the skull is Rebecca’s, the prairies of the border are not the ancestral lands of the dead young woman and the other “children” so Monroe’s improvised ritual does not actually succeed in returning them home and may be doing more harm than good; as David Lambert, the evolutionary geneticist leading the Griffith study, acknowledges, “[y]ou would most certainly never want to repatriate remains to a Place and Country that was wrong” (qtd. in Callaway).¹⁷

However, if we read Monroe’s ceremony as an act of *rematriation* – a return to the Earth, the mother – it opens up possibilities of relationality that are out of the question when

the bones are stored in dusty museum drawers. Ki'en Debicki argues persuasively that “Monroe gives the bones to the river to honour sacred alliances humans have with the Earth” (124). Justice agrees with this interpretation: “for Monroe – and perhaps King, too – the point is less about where they’re returned to than that they go back to the land and thus have at least a chance of connecting with the people” (131). This is the crucial point when contrasting rematriation with official acts of repatriation: rematriation privileges a reconnection to the earth and the restoration of ongoing, living relationships. This is certainly what happens to the bones in *Truth and Bright Water*. After being found by Soldier, the skull passes through all kinds of handling that may seem careless or irreverent: the boys treat the skull as a companion and talk to it, while Lum plays with it like a yo-yo (King 13), tosses it in the air (14), drops it in the bath (64), caresses and rocks it like a baby (176-77), and sings lullabies to it (228). Tecumseh’s grandmother warns the boys that it is “[b]ad luck to play with the dead” (159), but she herself gently “cradles” (160) the skull and offers it care. Through their touch, companionship, acts of mothering and imagined stories about her origins, the dead girl is made present and brought back into active kinship with others. As TallBear points out in her important book on *Native American DNA*, Indigenous kinship is “blood-infused but more than biological” (59), and it is these improvised kin relationships, borne out of care and the recognition of personhood, that are privileged in the text over any scientific verification of ancestral origins or formalized act of repatriation.

These priorities also pertain to the novel’s fleeting but significant references to extractive genetic research in a scene set in the local diner. A casual conversation between customers turns to a newspaper article about “a research team from the University of Toronto travelling around Canada and the States, collecting blood from Indian people” (166). Accompanied by an image “of a doctor holding up a vial of blood”, the research project – “something to do with genes and DNA” (166) – can be identified as the Human Genome

Diversity Project when it is referred to as “the Vampire Project” (166), the evocative name given to the HGDP in 1993 by the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (IPCB “Indigenous Peoples Opposition to the HGDP”). The local estate agent, Miles, asserts that “[t]hey’re trying to find out where Indians came from” (167) but the notion of establishing origins through genetic testing is ridiculed; one of the men replies “[d]on’t need a blood test to see that”, and Miles – a character King refers to in interview as “more than insensitive, less than racist” (Andrews 168) – responds by “pull[ing] at the corners of his eyes so they slant back, and all of us have a good laugh” (167). This joke about the racialization of physical features makes reference to the Bering Strait theory – the hypothesis that ancestors of Native Americans migrated across a land bridge from Asia thousands of years ago. Although lighthearted, the scene establishes in the novel’s local community a level of general public awareness about current scientific debate and taps into a source of significant Indigenous concern in the 1990s: the possibility that “the findings of the Human Genome Diversity Project could be used to further validate the Bering Strait hypothesis or other migration theories” (Wakeford 197) and as such could contest “Native Americans’ claims to indigeneity” (Wakeford 176) and consequently “challenge aboriginal rights to territory, resources and self-determination” (Harry and Dukepoo 8).¹⁸

As King was writing *Truth and Bright Water* in the late 1990s – a novel about a skull found in a river, which Tecumseh imagines to be “prehistoric” (King 71) – well-publicized legal battles were beginning over the repatriation of Kennewick Man or the Ancient One, a 9,000-year-old ancestor whose skeletal remains were discovered in 1996 on the banks of the Columbia River in Kennewick, Washington.¹⁹ The debate about whether the Ancient One should be repatriated via NAGPRA to local Indigenous communities for reburial as an ancestor or retained as a specimen for scientific study of his origins, had (like the HGDP) significant implications for population and migration histories.²⁰ As TallBear writes, “The so-

called Kennewick Man controversy shows the potential for human genome diversity research to challenge indigenous identity claims and rights over human remains” (*Native American DNA* 154). King’s inclusion of this brief scene of local gossip in the novel connects the biocolonialism of population genetics research to the biocolonialism inherent in repatriation debates, pitching the desire for scientifically verifiable “data” about Indigenous identity as part of a positivist colonialist knowledge project that began with the collection of bones in museums and continues with the extraction of blood. And with its potential allusions to both the Ancient One and the Trail of Tears, as well as its presence in the contemporary lives of Tecumseh and Lum, the skull in the novel performs acts of “time-traveling” (Radin xii) that underscore these continuities.

The space of the river itself – Monroe’s chosen place for his repatriation ritual – embodies the novel’s concern with the disposability of Indigenous life-force and Indigenous bodies within biocolonialist paradigms. In addition to the skulls, the river is a repository for huge amounts of “junk” and “garbage” (King 8). Much of this contains human biomatter. Tecumseh’s father earns extra money by illegally disposing of “Bio-Hazardous Waste”, “the junk hospitals can’t toss down the sink” (82), in the reservation landfill, which is then washed into the river. Medical waste is a regular presence in the water; the boys find “a rubber glove and a couple of those sticks that doctors shove down your throat to make you gag” (12-13), and later on they mistake a used medical pad or mattress for a dead body. Close up, this pad has “stains on this side, yellow and brown bruises that float in circles and fans on the surface” (172); King’s description here dwells on the evidence of human bodily substances. The river therefore carries Indigenous bones, blood and bodily fluids which have all at some point been treated as waste, junk, or dead matter. Eventually (perhaps inevitably, according to the text’s logic) at the end of the novel, a dead body *is* pulled out of the river after Lum – a troubled

and neglected native teenager – throws the skull back in and jumps after it in an act of suicide:

It took the police a couple of days to find Lum's body. They went up and down the river hauling all sorts of junk out of the water. They found the usual stuff, tires, car parts, a lawn mower, a mattress. Farther on, they ran across a bunch of yellow barrels [the Bio-Hazardous Waste] washed up on a sandbar.

(259)

The tragic combination of the bones, the bio-hazardous medical waste, and Lum's body in the river highlights the continuity between historical and present formations that render Indigenous bodies disposable. Indigenous bones in a museum drawer can be stolen without anybody noticing. Indigenous blood staining a hospital mattress is waste to be disposed of. Indigenous blood spilled in an act of teen suicide is, more contentiously, also rendered disposable in a context in which Indigenous lives are valued so poorly that youth suicide rates across Indian country constitute a public health crisis. Indigenous blood in a test-tube in a molecular biology laboratory, however, is valuable – indeed collectible – when used to extract “data” about Indigenous population histories and origins. Eugene Thacker asserts that “[m]odern biological thought always makes two demands of ‘life itself’: that it be essentially information (or pattern) and that it also be essentially matter (or presence)” (xviii). But if genetic ancestry projects and acts of museum biocolonialism transform “life itself” – the life-force or spirit inherent in the human body – into “information”, the imagery of medical waste in King's novel emphasizes the body as presence, as matter, resisting its abstraction into specimen or data.

By connecting the museum with the HGDP via the story of a skull in a river, *Truth and Bright Water* demonstrates the ongoing nature of extractive biocolonialism: even as Monroe is busy “de-collecting” native bones (Bruce 205n3), symbolically undoing acts of

colonial-era biocolonialism, another global-scale act of 20th century biological re-collection is underway and Indigenous bodies continue to be rendered vulnerable to appropriation, violation, and disposal. But Monroe's subversive "rescue" and repatriation of unaffiliated remains and the boys' affectionate relationship with the skull combine to refuse a narrative in which the skull is a specimen that must be isolated and preserved as a relic of the past. In Wakeham's terms, the novel refuses "the semiotics of taxidermy" (17) according to which life and death, preservation and extinction, are managed for scientific ends; in Vizenor's terms, it enacts Indigenous "survivance", "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories [...] renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (*Manifest Manners* vii). The skull is recognized as an embodied being and becomes a companion, the recipient of touch and affection and affect, and as Debicki identifies, "the Kaswéntah River accepts both the bones of Native children and the biohazardous bins from Truth, which also contain human remains" (124). To understand the river and the human remains as living, agentful relatives in this way enables the recognition of Monroe's rescue as an act of repatriation that facilitates relationality, survivance, and care.

Conscientious Curation and Spiritual Guardianship: Barry Barclay's *Te Rua*

Te Rua (1991), written and directed by Māori (Ngāti Apa) filmmaker Barry Barclay, comes much closer than *Truth and Bright Water* to representing an act of formal repatriation and is much more concerned with the protocols and mechanics of that process. However, it shares with the novel a focus on the appropriate care and custodianship of artefacts and the prioritization of their rightful relationships with contemporary Indigenous actors. Barclay made *Te Rua* more than a decade before repatriation legislation was introduced in Aotearoa New Zealand, and in its representation of the ethical complexities of repatriation the film "anticipated many of the discussions that would occur between Māori and museums about the

proper custodianship of Māori cultural property – particularly the holding of Māori human remains in museum collections – in the decades to come” (Strickland 158n1). As I shall discuss, the concept of spiritual guardianship that the film introduces offers an alternative to repatriation that is put into action when conditions are not right for a formal return of treasures.

Barclay’s longstanding interest in interlinked questions of ownership, guardianship and biocolonialism is evident throughout his film oeuvre and his two books, *Our Own Image* (1990), on Indigenous filmmaking, and *Mana Tuturu: Maori Treasures and Intellectual Property Rights* (2005). His 1985 documentary *The Neglected Miracle*, subtitled “The Stewardship of Plant Genetic Resources”, explores the commodification and genetic modification of seeds to create standardized crop varieties, and “began on the premise that [...] it is crazy to own life. How can we have a system where the genome is owned?” (Barclay, interviewed in Tuckett). Barclay’s “core word” in *The Neglected Miracle*, “stewardship”, resonates with many Indigenous farming dynamics, and instead of ownership “stresse[s] the symbiotic relationship between humans and the made landscape” (Barclay *Mana Tuturu* 44), a message reinforced in the film by multiple close-up shots of human hands cupping and handling seeds with care. As such, although he uses different terminology, the film extends an early – in many ways visionary – version of the critiques of biocolonialism (the exploitation and commodification of life itself) that became more prominent in the 1990s. It is also a significant precursor to the contemporary seed rematriation movement, which “call[s] for the reclamation of ancestral seeds to restore their place in the hands and gardens of Native community members” (Herrigty and Hill 1008).

These concerns about care, ownership, and rematriation (although the term was not yet in circulation) are also apparent in Barclay’s development in the early 1990s of a “Taonga Maori [Māori Treasures] Deposit Agreement” with the New Zealand Film Archive. This

posits the principle of “mana tuturu” or “Māori spiritual guardianship” (*Mana Tuturu* 267) in order to ensure continued community ownership of treasured Māori images and afford them “a protection that lasted *down the generations*” (*Mana Tuturu* 111, original emphasis). A concept that appears in *Te Rua* in relation to museum artefacts and is expounded at length in *Mana Tuturu*, the notion of spiritual guardianship is grounded in Māori tikanga (customary law) rather than the majority culture’s copyright and intellectual property regimes, and is based on the principle that “Indigenous law recognises collective ownership first and foremost, an ownership which does not last merely for a fixed period or even a single lifetime, but extends from generation to generation” (*Mana Tuturu* 82-83). The term mana tuturu carries the sense of “prerogative” and “the right thing” (*Mana Tuturu* 112-13), so it shares with repatriation a sense of rightful relationality. Barclay argues that its framework within tikanga “is so valuable [...] because it [tikanga] is the only body of understandings – i.e. of law – that covers the spiritual and intellectual dimensions to our traditional treasures [...] those immaterial aspects that are inherent in a made work rather than the made work itself” (*Mana Tuturu* 249). So, as film critic Roger Horrocks identifies, “[t]he whakapapa [genealogy]” of mana tuturu as a concept “goes way back” (Tuckett) in Barclay’s work and can be applied whether the treasure is genetic “data” in a seed variety, an image of Indigenous community on film, or an artwork in a museum. As in *Truth and Bright Water*, Barclay’s work makes overt connections between genetic ownership and the theft of Indigenous artefacts, and *Te Rua* can be read as a film centrally concerned with museum biocolonialism – claims to ownership of the life-force inherent in Indigenous treasures.

The case for formal repatriation in *Te Rua*, certainly in present day terms, is strong because the provenance of the artefacts in question is well established. Three Māori pou (carved panels) representing ancestors of the fictional Uritoto community have been stolen from the walls of their meeting house in the 1880s by a German man with the help of a man

from Uritoto, and are now held in crates in the storeroom of a Berlin museum.²¹ Like Silko's stone figures, these carvings are both taonga (treasures) and ancestors; one character explains that "they're alive to" (12:08-09) Nanny Matai (Nissie Herewini), a kuia (elder) who talks to the carvings and tends to their counterparts in the meeting house, and this sense of animacy is underscored by shots of the carvings in which the camera zooms in and pans around their faces while voices can be heard softly whispering (11:49-12:04, and in a dream sequence at 4:14-4:37). An NGO leader supporting the Uritoto community's claim goes on to explain the concept "mauri" or "life-force" (54:48-55:03) in an interview on German TV, in response to a question about whether Māori people "actually believe there are living spirits inside their carvings" (54:38-43). The film's title, *Te Rua*, translates as "the storehouse", a term that initially refers to a rua kumara – a pit for storing sweet potatoes – where the Uritoto man hides after being ostracized from his community for the theft, before eventually shooting himself. But of course "storehouse" has resonance with the museum storeroom, and the title foregrounds the issue of appropriate spaces for the housing of taonga.

The attempts of Rewi Marangai (Wi Kuki Kaa), a cosmopolitan Māori patent lawyer living in Berlin, and his performance poet nephew Peter Huata (Peter Kaa), to get the carvings back from the museum escalate from a repatriation claim to illegal activities, culminating in action they know will have them imprisoned for acts of theft and cultural vandalism. Peter's arrival in Berlin for an arts festival acts as a catalyst for a repatriation claim and, working with the NGO, he organizes a high-publicity protest at the museum. His Māori group then secretly plans a rescue mission, which results in a foiled attempt to break the carvings out of the storeroom when the NGO leader betrays them to the museum directors. Finally, the activists remove three European cultural treasures, stone busts of Julius Caesar, Pompeii, and Nero, from the public grounds of Charlottenberg Castle and hold them as "hostages" (1:10:19) in an abandoned factory building, soliciting international media

attention by planting explosives to create a siege situation. To participate in this action, Rewi – initially dismissed as a “Eurocrat” (41:11) and an “Uncle Tom” figure (38:48) by the more radical Peter – has to adapt his patent lawyer mindset, according to which cultural treasures are commodities subject to intellectual property legislation, and to fight for a different conception of value.

The “hostage” (1:10:19) scenario is staged as a straightforward act of fair exchange: European cultural treasures are being held until Māori treasures are given back. The presentation of the stone busts as “hostages” performs several acts of reframing. It situates both sets of treasures as living ancestors rather than artefacts or specimens, and it casts doubt on the museum’s claim to be an appropriate “storehouse” for the Uritoto carvings by – like the anti-colonial museum scholarship discussed by Magdalena Zolkos – provocatively “sketching a discursive connection between Western museums and prisons” via “a carceral logic of enclosing, immobilizing, and disciplining ‘objects’ within their spaces” (Zolkos 2). The activists’ framing of the hostage situation as a *quid pro quo* arrangement deliberately highlights a stark contrast between the presumed expertise of museum curators regarding the treatment of cultural treasures and the assumption that Indigenous groups seeking repatriation do not understand the true import of the objects they want to take home and are not able to care for them properly. As Mereata (Whetū Fala) calmly enquires, while negotiating on the phone from the abandoned factory (another inappropriate “storehouse” for treasures): “The point is, why can’t we look after a few German artefacts? The experts in Berlin are looking after our work. Can’t they trust us to be conscientious curators of their treasures? Are we inferior to them or something?” (1:17:48-1:18:04). By staging the hostage taking as an equal act of guardianship in these ironic terms, the protestors expose the continuing historical power imbalance between museums and Indigenous communities, the ambiguous line between “looking after” and incarceration, and the failure of metropolitan museums

themselves to perform conscientious curation – to care appropriately for treasures in their collections according to the values of the communities they come from.

While the activists' claims are rejected by museum director Dr Sattler (Walter Kreye), they are acknowledged by Professor Biederstedt (Günter Meisner), the chairman of the museum's Board of Trustees: a repentant collector, Biederstedt is haunted by the museum's spirits and plays a key role in the resolution that follows. Barclay avoids any reductive characterization of museum personnel as inevitably antagonistic to Indigenous claims by dramatizing a conflict between these two men: from the start, Biederstedt recognizes the spiritual import of the carvings, arguing that "we are staring at death here", but is repudiated by Sattler's cold reply: "we are staring at a straightforward bureaucratic matter" (47:53-48:01). Under direction from Biederstedt's Board, Sattler reluctantly agrees to return the carvings on the condition there is no publicity. Rejecting this with an act of performative "public demand-making" (Zolkos 6), standing on a stepladder and speaking into a megaphone to an audience of journalists and armed police, Rewi refuses this offer on ethical grounds:

"This gentleman has told us, away from the light of day, that our ancestors will be returned, quietly, like thieves released from prison. No publicity. They will be returned only when we give up our freedom, like burglars caught in the act. Dr Sattler, our ancestors were crept out in the darkness. One hundred years later, I will not be party to creeping them home again. I reject your offer." (1:22:03-40)

This is a case of a longed-for repatriation that is ultimately refused because its conditions are demeaning and grounded in "carceral logic" (Zolkos 2), privileging the reputation of the museum over the restoration of right relationships that a true act of rematriation would enable.

In the end, the activism results in a new arrangement that Rewi has drawn up prior to the siege, facilitated by his Pākehā (white New Zealander) lawyer colleague Hamish McMillan (Stuart Devenie) and Mr Mboya (Bubacar Jammeh), an African diplomat of unspecified nationality. The legal document Rewi has produced, on which the camera lingers for several seconds at a time in three separate close-up shots (1:02:36-42; 1:24:01-05; 1:24:51-57), enabling the viewer to read it in full, is entitled “Tikanga Pono” (true to the principles of culture). It allows copyright and previous contracts to remain in place, McMillan explains (1:13:39-41), but reads, in Māori then English translation (indicating the primacy of Māori law): “The Museum Board of Trustees agrees that the spiritual guardianship (mana tuturu) of the three Uritoto carvings – Hamatua, Nga Kawaa, and Whatawahini – will remain with the tangata whenua [Indigenous people] of Uritoto in perpetuity.” The carvings themselves will remain physically in Berlin but, in line with Barclay’s account of tikanga in *Mana Tuturu*, a distinction is made between “the made work itself” and its “immaterial aspects” (249); Mboya explains to Sattler that “you might hold the outside, for the time being, doctor, but you will never own what is inside” (1:13:54-59).²² The mana tuturu agreement, originating in the principles of Māori culture, allows the mauri of the carvings to return home.

Rewi’s decision to reject the offer of repatriation is controversial – Peter avers that “we all feel cheated Rewi” (1:23:40-42) – but the film makes clear that it is the ethically and spiritually correct outcome of the situation, a meaningful act of return rather than merely a symbolic consolation: the moment Professor Biederstedt signs the document (1:24:51-57), the scene cuts, via a crescendo of operatic music and the image of crashing waves, to Nanny Matai, back home in the meeting house, sensing that “they’ve come back” (1:25:04-05). Just as important as events in Berlin, she has been leading preparations in Uritoto to create the right conditions to receive guardianship of the carvings. The kumara storehouse (site of the

thieving ancestor's shameful exile) is burned down and at the end of the film, Nanny Matai reveals his gravesite to the community so they can accept the events of the past. This multifaceted and collective action demonstrates how, as Zolkos argues, it can be reductive to view the "physical return of items [as] an endpoint of restitution" (5); instead, restitution may be understood as "a field of socio-cultural and political practices that include the act of physical return but also exceed it" (6). With the mana tuturu agreement, rightful guardianship of the carvings' life-force has passed back to Uritoto. This constitutes a form of repatriation, presided over by matriarch/kuia Nanny Matai, that embodies Māori kaupapa – principles for rightful action – and prioritizes tikanga over the "crazy" notion (to Barclay), embedded in property law, that life can be owned.

Like *Truth and Bright Water*, then, *Te Rua* imagines an act of meaningful repatriation that is quite different from any repatriation process that existed at the time of writing. Anticipating the repatriation initiatives that have gathered momentum in the past decade or so, both fictions conceive of Indigenous-led pathways to the return of stolen treasures, pathways that bypass the formal repatriation protocols of their period and dramatize the insufficiency of these processes for caring for Indigenous remains and treasures in culturally appropriate ways. Like other repatriation fictions, they stage a version of Vizenor's Bone Courts, performing as a forum for the (self-)representation and rights of the ancestors whose bones, DNA, or life-force have been incarcerated or commodified. Evoking similar rights-based language to Vizenor, Werry asks:

What if we were to grant the indigenous dead the most basic of rights that their living descendants claim: what if we were to listen to them, rather than speak for them? [...] It would be a dangerous politics indeed in which we allowed the dead to act on and in the future: a politics of dissensus, which

asserts that the misdeeds of the past are better continually presenced than absolved[.] (Werry 99-100)

Indigenous rematriation fictions create a forum for honouring these rights, listening to the dead, and enacting such a politics of dissensus. The ability of fiction to give voice to the intangible or ghostly, animate the relationality between past and present, and imagine a place for the ancestors in alternative futures is a form of presencing that, rather than attempting to undo the misdeeds of the past, can guide us towards correct and appropriate forms of action in the future. As philosopher of science Laurelyn Whitt describes,

Stories have long figured as indispensable aspects of indigenous legal and political knowledge practice. [...] The integrative power of stories, the way they help us initiate and maintain relationships with others who may appear different from us, is especially needed to guide human interaction with the other-than-human world. (35-36)

The stories found in rematriation fictions of the 1990s anticipated Indigenous-led scientific governance models and developments in repatriation practices that have since begun to be put into practice, but they still have much to teach us. As repatriation work in the twenty-first century begins to incorporate the genetic science that posed such a threat to Indigenous communities in the 1990s, these texts offer principles that can continue to guide scientific and museological decision-making: the importance of recognizing life-force in Indigenous remains and treasures; the need to be guided by tikanga, or Indigenous law, even when this necessitates adaptations to western-derived formulations of ownership; the restoration of right relationships in the present and for the future; and the prioritization of laying ancestors to rest in their ancestral lands, wherever possible, over storing them in boxes on museum shelves just in case promissory science may result in “spectacular afterlives” (Kowal 2). The recognition that these works of imaginative fiction constitute valuable sources of critique,

theory, and knowledge practice opens up a powerful ethical resource for the next phases of repatriation science and policy.

Notes

¹ As a non-Indigenous literary critic working on these sensitive issues, I aspire to the form of “ethical engagement” with Indigenous texts and histories that Canadian settler scholar Sam McKegney describes in *Magic Weapons* (59). For McKegney, while it is important for the non-Indigenous critic to “acknowledge[...] the limits of her or his knowledge” (45), the most significant way “[t]o respect the creative work of Native writers, the intellectual work of Native critics, and the activist work of Native community members” is to “engage – listen, learn, dialogue, and debate” (44). I am equally indebted to Warren Cariou’s (Métis/European) theorization of “critical humility”, an approach to literary criticism that is “model[led] after the practice of story listening”. He writes: “when we read Indigenous literature, we [should] approach the work with an understanding that we can’t know it completely, and that perhaps there are even aspects of it that some or all of us shouldn’t know. That kind of humility could help to create a more ethical kind of reading, one that is less appropriative and more sensitive to the cultural roles of these works” (8). It is this approach that I aim to take in this article.

² Nisga’a poet Jordan Abel’s collection of erasure poetry, *The Place of Scraps* (2013), for instance, literally undoes the work of Marius Barbeau, an early twentieth-century salvage anthropologist, by deconstructing on the page the text of Barbeau’s authoritative book, *Totem Poles* (1950), to reveal other, native stories between the words and spaces. A passage about transporting totem poles to museums, for example, is gradually erased to expose the line “remove thousands of Indians successfully without feeling a tremor” (Abel 25).

³ Repatriation was established in the United States with NAGPRA, the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (National Park Service). A mandate to fund the repatriation of ancestral remains has been Australian governmental policy since 2011 (Australian Government) and in Aotearoa New Zealand since 2003 (Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa). In Aotearoa, international repatriations are returned initially to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, while a 2021 National Repatriation Policy has introduced more robust guidelines for domestic repatriation practice (see Museums Aotearoa). Canada has no federal legislation requiring the return of Indigenous ancestral remains or cultural artefacts nor a funding programme to support repatriation work; in 2019 the Indigenous Human Remains and Cultural Property Repatriation Act was proposed but not passed into law. There is certainly a collective will in the Canadian heritage sector and in government to establish robust repatriation policy (see Danyluk and MacKenzie), but in practice, “[a]ncestors’ repatriation and rematriation processes still constitute a legal Kafkaesque situation for Indigenous communities” (Martin-Moya et al. 387).

⁴ A 2024 Final Rule has made changes to improve the implementation of NAGPRA, including the elimination of the category “culturally unidentifiable human remains”. See National Park Service “The Regulations”.

⁵ The concept of rematriation has emerged relatively recently within Indigenous Studies frameworks: Emma Herrighty and Christina Gish Hill (2009) credit Steven Newcomb with the first use of the term in 1995, writing in response to NAGPRA, while other commentators including Gray (3) trace the term to esteemed Stó:lō author Lee Maracle’s *I Am Woman* (1988/1996). Rematriation initiatives have proliferated over the last decade or so across a number of spheres of Indigenous scholarship and activism, including land reclamation, seed rematriation (see Herrighty and Hill), feminism and LGBTQ+ rights, museums and cultural heritage, and arts activism. Herrighty and Hill offer a detailed genealogy of the term’s

evolution while Gray provides multiple examples of contemporary rematriation activities.

Within the field of Indigenous Literary Studies, Theresa Lynn Gregor has developed an important method of “literary rematriation”, which involves the retranslation of Indigenous life narratives published in English into their original Indigenous languages. Building on Lenora Ledwon’s postulation that “American Indian autobiographies or life stories should be recognized as ‘cultural patrimony’” under the terms of NAGPRA (Gregor 101), Gregor asserts that “[a]cts of literary rematriation can [...] ‘return’ life stories to the mother tongue (or Native language of origin) and preserve cultural patrimony through literary and discursive acts” (102). In Gregor’s formulation, literary texts themselves may be rematriatable entities.

My notion of rematriation fictions refers to more recent literary texts that function as politicized discursive spaces for the exploration of, and advocacy for, rematriation rights.

⁶ Kneubuhl’s *Ola Nā Iwi*, for instance, intersperses the poignant story of Nanea, a ghostly “person whose spirit is left to wander” (198), with “collector vignettes” (Howes xxvi): scenes featuring nineteenth-century characters including a craniologist, a phrenologist, grave robbers, and a curator of anthropology. The emphasis of the play, though, is on the reburial of Nanea’s bones in Hawai‘i to enable her spirit to rest.

⁷ The HGDP was a notorious international population genetics programme, launched in 1991, which aimed to immortalize the cell lines from isolated, assumed to be “vanishing”, Indigenous populations around the globe, in order to preserve their genetic “data” before it was “irretrievably lost” (Cavalli-Sforza et al 490). Intended to map human genetic histories and migrations and even to counter genetic theories of race, the HGDP met with censure, and Indigenous protest, on multiple bioethical grounds, including the potential for commercial gene patenting, informed consent, and the project’s insulting rhetoric of extinction and preservation, tantamount to a 20th century ‘Vanishing Indian’ narrative (see Whitt Chapters 4 and 5 and Reardon).

⁸ The term ancient DNA (or aDNA) “refers to the study of DNA extracted from specimens that died decades, hundreds or sometimes thousands of years ago”, and applies to any situation in which DNA has not been scientifically preserved and has thus degraded, rendering “conventional fresh DNA extraction techniques” unusable: “Practically speaking, the term aDNA relates to the condition of the DNA, not necessarily the age” (ISOGG Wiki).

⁹ For critiques of the HGDP, see Whitt Chapters 4 and 5 and Reardon; on the Genographic Project, initiated in 2005 and often seen as the HGDP’s successor, see TallBear *Native American DNA* Chapter 4.

¹⁰ In the last couple of decades, Indigenous genomic scientists have developed research protocols grounded in “sovereign-based governance models” (Garrison et al. 495) and developed Indigenous-led ethics guidelines and participatory research methodologies (Claw et al.), meaning that in progressive research initiatives, Indigenous stakeholders can set research agendas and ensure that research findings are beneficial for their communities. Some Indigenous communities “have created research review boards to implement mechanisms of accountability that position themselves as partners in research” (Claw et al. 2), while institutions such as the National Center for Indigenous Genomics in Australia now “regulate archived materials”, “ensure [...] Indigenous custodianship of biological samples”, and “promote genomic research of benefit to Indigenous Australians” (4). The Summer Internships for INdigenous Peoples in Genomics (SING) Consortium is a key actor in developing frameworks for Indigenous-led genomic research.

¹¹ Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe sociologist Vanessa Watts offers an extended discussion of agency within Indigenous and Euro-Western knowledge systems, demonstrating how the agency of nonhuman entities is “subjugated” in dominant Euro-Western discourse but asserting that, “if we think of agency as being tied to spirit, and spirit exists in all things, then all things possess agency” (30).

¹² This aligns with Indigenous objections to certain forms of genetic research on the grounds that DNA embodies ancestry. To give one example, Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou political scientist Aroha Te Pareake Mead explains how, “for Māori, the physical human gene is inextricably linked to the metaphysical whakapapa [genealogy], that is, the direct heritage from ancestors which must be transmitted to descendants” and “the human gene contains a life force (mauri) which [cannot] be separated or isolated as an entity devoid of life” (129).

¹³ Vizenor is a prolific author of rematriation fictions in texts including (but not limited to) the 1984 screenplay and film *Harold of Orange* (Weise [dir.]; Vizenor and Saint-Marie), the 1995 play *Ishi and the Wood Ducks*, and novels *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991) and *Chancers* (2000). His sustained historical and imaginative engagement with Ishi, the last known member of the Yahi community who lived for several years as an object of study and display in the University of California Museum of Anthropology, has received more critical attention than most rematriation fictions. See Helstern and Schweninger for analysis of some of Vizenor’s museum texts. The small amount of critical work currently available on Indigenous museum fictions tends to focus primarily on North American texts and contexts: see Justice Chapter 3.

¹⁴ Since Vizenor wrote about Bone Courts there have been significant advances regarding the recognition of Indigenous legal frameworks, and rights have been granted to ostensibly inanimate nonhuman entities. The Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand, for instance, was granted legal personhood in 2017 (see Hokowhitu).

¹⁵ Another of Wendy Rose’s poems, “Truganinny”, functions as a “Bone Court” for Truganinny, a woman known as the last Tasmanian Aboriginal or the last full-blooded speaker of the Tasmanian language. When she died in 1876, Truganinny’s skeleton was exhumed and put on display against her express wishes and was only laid to rest a century later. The poem reads as an articulation of Truganinny’s dying wishes – her last will and

testament: “Put me under the bulk of a mountain or in the distant sea. / Put me where they will not find me” (55). The second-person narrative voice and use of imperatives makes the reader directly complicit with Truganinny’s mistreatment and the poem functions as a forum for a dead Indigenous woman to assert her rights to have her dying wishes granted and not to be mistreated or degraded.

¹⁶ The Trail of Tears references the forced displacement of the five so-called “Civilized Tribes” from their ancestral homelands to Oklahoma. In interview, King confirms that Neugin was “a real historical character” who survived the Trail of Tears as an eight-year-old child and whose story “haunted me for a long time until I was able to use it in the book” (Andrews 180).

¹⁷ *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass* also explores the politics of wrongful repatriation in an episode of comedic reversals in which the Trickster figure Nanabush steals Indigenous bones from the county museum and buries them on Anishnawbe ancestral land, aiming to have the land designated an ancient burial ground and thus to quell dissent within the local community about what to do with ancestral land that has been unprecedentedly given back. His creation of “a skeletal potpourri” by including human remains from the museum originating in *other* civilizations worldwide – a subversive act designed to cause havoc for the “scientists and forensics people” (Taylor 315) – has him thrown off the reserve by local chief Maggie.

¹⁸ See Raff for a recent and balanced “genetic history of the Americas”, informed by Indigenous science and histories.

¹⁹ On the Ancient One/Kennewick Man, see Wakeham Chapter 4; TallBear *Native American DNA* 152-58; and Raff Chapter 9.

²⁰ Controversies over Kennewick Man’s origins and legal cases regarding his repatriation were ongoing for 20 years until, in 2016, DNA testing on his skeleton and living members of the Colville Tribes revealed that he shares genetic ancestry with present-day Native

Americans. His remains were repatriated to claimant tribes and reburied on 18 February, 2017. See Raff Chapter 9.

²¹ Stuart Murray explains that the film's setting in Germany was determined by the conditions of its funding: "Representatives of a public German co-production fund (the Berlin Senate and Film Commission) [...] approached Barclay and [producer] John O'Shea with the idea of producing a feature jointly funded by the German investors and the NZFC [New Zealand Film Commission]. Under the terms of the investment, part of the film had to be set in Berlin and it also would have to deal with issues pertaining to Māori" (71). The museum scenes were filmed in the Naturkunde Museum in east Berlin, after the Dahlem Museum pulled out of being involved, "a change that Barclay attributes to the worries the script created for the Dahlem authorities" (73).

²² Mboya's interest in the Tikanga Pono document appears to stem in part from his sense of its applicability in African contexts. He comments that in advocating for "spiritual ownership of cultural property", Rewi is "proposing a perfect way out" (1:02:54-58), and tells Rewi that he has the support of six African embassies in Germany. The film may be implicitly referring to ongoing claims for repatriation of the Benin bronzes, many of which were held in Berlin until the repatriation of 514 items to Nigeria in 2022. See Hicks on the Benin bronzes.

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