

Research and Engagement Working Group (REWG) Community Engagement

Restitution and the Anatomy Museum: Workshop 2

7 February 2024

1–4pm

Scottish Storytelling Centre

Introduction

The purpose of this workshop was to focus on proposals made specifically in relation to the repatriation of ancestral remains held within the Anatomical Museum, and more generally in relation to heritage artefacts and ancestral heirlooms linked to colonialism held by the University of Edinburgh (UoE). Its aim was to discuss and build on these proposals by listening to the views and perspectives of participants, which included UoE students and staff, heritage communities, museum curators and other interested parties.

In preparation, a summary document had been circulated to all participants that outlined the preceding discussions and themes that had led to the initial proposals. The recommendations listed in the summary document were the result of four previous focus group sessions held with students, UoE staff, heritage communities and other interested parties on 15 and 22 November and 6 and 13 December 2023, in addition to wider discussions with relevant stakeholders, such as staff at the Anatomical Museum. The purpose of the preceding focus groups was twofold. First, to understand more about how repatriation functions within the UoE by consulting with those involved in such processes (such as provenance researchers), those with ancestral links to the 'collection' and those broadly defined as heritage communities. Second, to assess whether there are ways to make the repatriation process more reparatory going forwards, while also recognising the important work that is ongoing within the Anatomical Museum to repatriate ancestral remains.

The desire to explore repatriation processes emerged during the REWG's inaugural community event on 22 April 2023. Repatriation represents one of four community engagement themes that were identified by communities of reparatory justice interest and other interested parties as being central to the REWG's work, in line with participatory research methods.¹ Other themes for community engagement include:

- creating a space primarily for use by ethnically and racially minoritised communities as part of a broader research centre dedicated to addressing racial injustice;
- addressing issues with institutional archiving in terms of how to make archives linked to colonialism, slavery and anti-racist activism more accessible to researchers and heritage communities, as well as creating an activist archive linked to the UK-branch of the International Social Movement for Afrikan Reparations (ISMAR);

¹ 'Participatory research brings out the views of local people: their reality, their challenges, and their understanding of problems and solutions. Their ideas may prove to be quite distinct from those in charge of formulating the policies that affect their lives. Participatory research can therefore produce surprising insights for policy, and may challenge the assumptions on which policy frameworks are based'; Institute of Development Studies, 'Research and Analysis', <https://www.participatorymethods.org/task/research-and-analyse> (accessed 21 June 2024).

- and finding ways to decolonise the curriculum in collaboration with Omolabake Fakunle and the broader Curriculum Transformation Project, including looking at ways to link with Indigenous pedagogies and cultural institutions.

The Anatomical Museum, as a legacy of colonial violence, provides an important case study for exploring many of the questions that are central to the REWG's broader investigation into the UoE's history and legacies of slavery, colonialism and the development of racial thought. As with all of our community engagement, the workshop was framed by the REWG's [Principles of Participation](#) that seek not only to ensure mutual respect, but also a commitment to recognising historical and contemporary struggles for social and reparatory justice, to building partnerships and restoring agency, and to cognitive justice and equity in collaboration.

Attendees (in order of presentation)

- Nicki Frith (event co-host, Co-Chair of the REWG and Decolonised Transformations project, Senior Lecturer researching reparations for African enslavement, co-founder of the International Network for Scholars and Activists for Afrikan Reparations, [INOSAAR](#))
- Samantha Likonde (Community Engagement Officer for the REWG and event co-host)
- Yarong Xie (Research Fellow studying attitudes towards, and experiences of, racism within UoE by conducting surveys as part of the REWG's work)
- Moritz Hansen (a retired surgeon from the US with a background in teaching anatomy, surgery and respect and dignity at university level)
- Steph Scholten (Director of The Hunterian, University of Glasgow, leading on developing guidance for restitution and return for universities and university museums, member of the Executive Board and formerly also the ethics committee for the International Council of Museums, ICOM)
- Omolabake Fakunle (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion [EDI] lead on the Curriculum Transformations Project [CTP], EDI Director at Moray School of Education and Chancellors Fellow at UoE. Her research looks at inclusivity in international education)
- Daryl Green (Head of Heritage Collections at UoE, Co-Director of the Centre for Research Collections [CRC], provides curatorial support for the Anatomical Museum and has worked on reparations and restitution)
- Zaki El-Salahi (member of the Sudanese community in Edinburgh and lead for the Edinburgh Sudanese Community Partnership, community consultant for the REWG. His interest in the Anatomical Museum lies in the fact that the heads of his ancestors from Omdurman, Sudan, are currently held by UoE)
- Ebo Anyebe (third year medical student at UoE, studying the anthropology and the sociology of medicine, and Co-President of the African Caribbean Medical Society Edinburgh)
- Asheema Kour (event assistant who recently graduated with a bachelor's degree in law)
- Fiza Owais (final-year English literature student)
- Nicole Anderson (PhD student in Social Anthropology whose thesis is investigating the Anatomical Museum's first proactive repatriation by working with First Nations)

and Inuit communities in Canada. She conducts provenance research and, in collaboration with communities, is trying to find a more reparative approach to repatriation)

- Abigail Olugbire (third year law student at UoE who has attended many of the REWG's focus groups)
- [On Zoom] Meg Dolan (PhD student at the University of St Andrews studying art and culture, alumnus of UoE where she studied world history, collections and curating practices, and worked briefly on ancestral remains within the Anatomical Museum)
- [On Zoom] Gaia Duberti (PhD student at UoE looking at the history and provenance of some of the ancestral remains in the Anatomical Museum)
- [On Zoom] Daisy Chamberlain (former UoE student who conducted some provenance work at the Anatomical Museum looking at the skulls removed from Africa during the nineteenth century and uncovering the histories of those who were stolen. She now works as an Assistant Curator at the National Maritime Museum, London, and works with community/heritage groups to explore ways to narrate colonial histories)
- Silence Chihuri (founder of the Fair Justice System for Scotland Group and community consultant for the REWG)
- John Harries (Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology who has collaborated with the Anatomical Museum and worked with First Nations and Inuit communities in Canada whose ancestors are within the Anatomical Museum)

Summary of Discussion

Two initial questions were posed:

1. What interests led you to come to today's session?
2. What should be the governing motivations for museum collections to review their histories and commit to cultural change?

Motivation to Attend

- To gain points of reflection on the summary document in terms of addressing any omissions and identifying further engagements, as well as linking to communities and voices that have not yet been heard.
- To connect this work to wider discussions within the museum sector, notably in light of the fact that the Scottish Minister for Culture has just [accepted the recommendations of the Empire, Slavery and Scottish Museums Steering Group](#), which includes recommendations on repatriation. Guidelines for Scottish museums and, by extension, museums within universities are to be created and a conference on repatriation will be held on 19 April in Glasgow.
- To further a proposal to work across institutions in Glasgow and Edinburgh that are currently holding ancestral artefacts and remains linked to the Battle of Omdurman, with a view to holding an exhibition to bring everything together.
- To understand more about problems with perception and communication from both affected communities and those inside and outside of the UoE in terms of understanding the nature of the 'collection', what work has been done historically and

what work is currently underway. There are concerns that current perceptions and communications do not represent what the UoE has done and is doing about the 'collection', and these misunderstandings risk jeopardising current repatriation efforts.

- To find ways to take forward the recommendations outlined in the summary document, notably the reference to creating an exhibition for the REWG project overall. As noted in the document, this exhibition should highlight the resistance of those who were colonised, since this narrative tends to get subsumed under narratives of pain. The exhibition needs to be communicated in a highly visible place within the institution.
- To explore concerns raised by staff from the Anatomical Museum in relation to: 1. The risk of damaging current/future repatriation efforts; 2. The need to address factual inaccuracies; 3. The need for the REWG to engage with communities who have been through the repatriation process before making recommendations.

Main Discussion Points Linked to Cultural Change and Repatriation

On the transparency and communicability of repatriation processes:

- Transparency in relation to repatriation processes require a lot of discussion. Conversations about repatriation tend to take place, necessarily, in quiet spaces between the different counterparts until there is an agreement, which always needs to be led by the receiving communities. Questions of transparency likewise need to be led by communities, who may be happy to be vocal and open, but who may also wish otherwise.
- Repatriation is usually a very quiet and sensitive process. After repatriation has taken place, some communities are happy to be vocal about it, but it is also solemn work.
- The Anatomical Museum is very protective about what it does. Most of what the public see about repatriation are the press releases and other media articles. There can be frustration when criticism seems to be being levelled at the Anatomical Museum when they are engaged in, and in favour of, repatriation. Last year, three private repatriations took place, for example. We need to address the communication and perception side of things as part of change-making.
- While the relationship with the Anatomical Museum had been very helpful and welcoming, from the Sudanese community perspective, there were issues with the failure to recognise the Sudanese community's role in media articles concerning the ancestral remains in which they had become invisible.

On making repatriation processes more reparatory:

- To take a reparatory approach, repatriation is all about relationship building. Something that was missing in the summary report was having the financial resources to make that possible. The difficulty is that communities do not know that their ancestors are here, so having someone leading on a proactive knowledge-sharing and provenance-sharing initiative is key.
- A related question is how to publicise knowledge about provenance and educate the community about that history. Communities generally want to either get their

ancestors back or to establish better care practises for them if repatriation is not appropriate.

- Consultation with communities is needed when going through a repatriation process, so we also need to consider how to compensate for their time, expertise and labour. First Nations peoples (and others) expect to be paid for their time through honoraria. Everything has to be done through consent and outreach. A lack of resourcing is one of the issues facing the Anatomical Museum to help with sensitive outreach and quiet careful relationship building. Providing a careful, sensitive and ethical approach to this is the most important thing for the ancestors in the museum.
- UoE is likely to be very tight on its finances. For example, the CRC has made a business case for a new role to liaise between the Anatomical Museum and the CRC. This person will bring people into the collections/archives and help them on their journey. Current staffing within the Anatomical Museum is not enough to achieve the recommendations being made.
- There are fundamental issues with resources and capacity. While the Anatomical Museum staff are doing excellent work, they are quite thinly spread. It would be a good idea for the Anatomical Museum to really think about its purpose. The Sudanese community built a participatory process that would have provided a way forwards, but the answer from the top was that there were no resources to support their initiatives. Going forwards, a commitment is needed from the top, or an open statement that there is no commitment, so that people know where they stand. People are no longer prepared to work on a voluntary basis. The REWG is the first group to have remunerated him for his time. No community should be expected to do work without honoraria and without longer-term commitments.
- In terms of costs for repatriation, it is not just about remunerating the partners that you work with, but also the costs of transportation. A recent example was NMS's return of the [Nisga'a totem pole](#), which ran into millions. This does require serious commitment. Sometimes partners have money. But in many cases, partners lack resources and countries may lack processes and the legal frameworks to make repatriation happen.
- Indigenous communities are often not recognised by their federal governments and therefore cannot always access federal funds.
- At the level of language, is repatriation (or even rematriation) the right word? When it is to the country of origin, we can probably use the term repatriation. But what term do we use when we return directly to Indigenous communities [who are not recognised as nations]? The term 'return' is arguably more neutral.
- We need to recognise that we are talking about very different contexts in terms of how the situation relates differently to First Nations and Indigenous communities, for example in Australia or Canada, compared with the UK or Africa. Recognising the differences is very important so as not to use the same tool to address the different problems created by colonial contexts.
- Every experience of repatriation is unique and brings its own specificities that need to be addressed in unique ways. Part of the methodology has to include that flexibility. A framework and a process is needed, but without being too prescriptive. Repatriation might often be understood as transactional in terms of giving something back, but in fact it is about reparations, relationship building, empowering communities and recognition. Repatriation can be the vessel through which to do that. There is no

question about whether or not ancestral remains should be returned: they represent the most direct reference to colonial violence. At the same time, there are a lot of things that stand in the way, such as knowing who to return the remains to?

- We not only need to collaborate with communities more eloquently and comprehensively, but also recognise the extent to which UoE was embedded in the production of racial forms of knowledge.
- We also need to recognise that the UoE was not unique in terms of its links to Phrenology: many western institutions were involved in the production of racial knowledge, for example through physical anthropology. The focus on Phrenology in the summary report suggests that this was a thing of the past, when it has many continuities today.
- The REWG's unique approach is about including grassroots perspectives and about providing space to recognise people's emotional responses to the subjects under discussion. This also means understanding how the Anatomical Museum staff may feel about being spokespersons for the 'collection', noting that this is something that we need to know more about. This will be different from the emotional responses of descendant communities and communities of reparatory justice interest. The REWG positions itself as a mediator of these perspectives. This is not about critiquing the Anatomical Museum, but rather understanding how people are perceiving the question of repatriation from different positionalities. Hearing these views will enable us to come to a more balanced view.
- Resource is needed to support repatriation efforts, including visas.
- If we want to move towards more facilitative, collaborative and decolonising approaches whereby UoE cedes some of its power, we need to think about things like money, visas and bureaucratic processes. These practical things are often the impediments to proceeding. The will might be there, but we also need to address the mundane practical issues to help facilitate repatriation in real time.
- More resourcing is needed to support descendant communities, such as those who were enslaved and colonised and were made to work for nothing, who should not be asked to do this kind of work for free today. To do so is to continue with injustice and is not redress. Some clarification and justification is needed to explain why, when we are dealing with the legacies of human injustice, resources are not being allocated to support community involvement. He noted that he had been sitting on a lot of different committees linked to recognising the colonial past, including the Museums Working Group, the City Council Working Group and now the West Lothian Working Group. In each case, he is expected to work for free.
- The university makes it very difficult to pay people for this kind of work. There should be mechanisms to properly compensate people for their expertise and time.
- This kind of work is not sufficiently valued or perceived as valuable. It is not included in our rewards and promotions processes. We need to find ways to move the dialogue forward.
- There is a need to recognise that this work is very emotional, yet it is often emotion that the institution wants to remove from the process because it feels that this is 'irrational'. There needs to be support both of university staff and those communities who are engaging with this journey.
- Even if the institution could commit to covering flight tickets for recipient communities, that would be a step forward. It could also be a question of redistributing

resources within the CRC, for example to make the archives and records more readily accessible. There are currently no finding aids or collection descriptions for any of the provenance records, so as a researcher or descendant you have to go through all of the boxes to find the things you need, which is very time consuming. There are people who know how to make this clearer, but resources need to be reallocated.

- In the next 3-4 months, the website should be updated to make the process of beginning repatriation clearer.

On cultural change within museum and university sectors:

- To see some examples of institutions that have gone through a process of cultural change, look at the two exhibitions in Glasgow: [Curating Discomfort](#) and [The Trembling Museum](#).
- In terms of financing, the Medical School is coming up to its 300-year anniversary in 2026 and the Anatomical Museum is in their space. They are likely to have a lot more budget to get things going and should be brought into the discussion. They are also very willing to go on a historical journey in terms of being open and honest about their history.
- We need to understand the governing motivation for the institution as a whole (and the Anatomical Museum within that) and whether it is aligned with reparations because that would inform how to move forwards. A good template for working in partnership and with reparative processes is the Sudanese community's engagement work with the UoE, which led to the submission of a large-scale three-year proposal in 2021, calling for a five-year pilot restitutional programme (before they learned about the ancestors whose remains are in the Anatomical Museum). Reparations should guide us in our approach to working together. The top-level decision-makers within the institution should be in these conversations.
- There are things that the UoE can do immediately that do not cost much, e.g. having information on the website about repatriation processes (which is also mentioned in the report) and highlighting key contacts. This would help communities to understand how they can engage with this process. Museums in Canada, for example, have that information readily available.
- Questions were raised about repurposing capital money for staff resource, which is constantly restrained and reduced, noting that a redefinition and reallocation of capital expenditure would be useful. Investing in things like buildings and heritage collections add asset value to the UoE, but staff too are 'assets'. Such a redefinition would need to be worked through a financial model.
- Good will can be capitalised in the university balance sheet. When people say they can't do things, we have to remember that people can make decisions about how they present their accounts within the remit of the law. It is usually that people don't want to change things, so they resist because they don't understand the need for change. The UoE is interested financially in assets that will grow over time. But a university's reputation is also an asset and is impossible to recapture once you lose it. We need measures to measure this over time.
- When it comes to the full report of the REWG, it needs to include the UoE's reputation as this is language that they will understand.

- What is currently missing from the summary document is information about collaboration. If the Medical School is moving, this represents a great opportunity, and a good case can be made to address the history of the school within the 2026 context. We are also within 500m of the Royal College, the National Museum and other institutions facing similar problems. We are also within Scotland, which is a relatively small country, where collaboration is relatively easy. If you are a 'source community', you currently have to go to different institutions to find out your things are. SS is advocating at a national level for an information point from which people can find out what is in Scottish collections. He pointed to a project called NMS '[Reveal and Connect](#)', which is making an inventory of African and Caribbean collections. This is a good starting point to enable people to join the dots, but we all need to start working together. Other institutions should also be referenced as examples for Edinburgh to follow.
- A clear roadmap is needed to adhere to the budgetary cycle of the institution so that things can be planned accordingly. We also need representation from the Medical School in these discussions.
- The forthcoming Interim Report talks about the need for Senior Management to be present at events so that people know that these discussions are being taken seriously and so that Senior Management can respond on things like budgets. Senior Management had been invited to this event (and others), but had been busy. At the next event, representation is needed so that we can find out how things happen at an institutional level. Even though this piece of work has been commissioned by the institution, we do not have high-level connections to decision-makers.
- Students and EUSA need to push this work to the Executive. It would be good to call a specific meeting on change-making and feature it in their publications.
- EUSA are interested in forming a 'BAME Council' to hold the university to account in relation to this work. The Interim Report will first be submitted to EDIC and then on to the Executive at which point students could get involved.
- There needs to be greater clarity about where power lies within the institution. The removal of four portraits from Old College (including Arthur Balfour) has taken 9 years! Even once a decision was made, it took another 3 months to decide where the money was coming from. Who has the power, who should be at the table and who has control of the budget to be able to put forward the initiatives in the report? The UoE is highly federated with power structures siloed into the various schools. The Executive has some power but to what extent has yet to be fully tested. The process of making recommendations will test where the power actually lies within the institution to push forward change.

On exhibitions:

- UoE does not have a permanent exhibition space that could currently be used for it to curate narratives about its own history. While UoE should be taking ownership of putting on the exhibition, such events are ephemeral in nature. While they can be high impact, they are also a flash in the pan. We want to be pushing for both high impact activities and prolonged engagement with these topics. An exhibition is a great way to get people in the door, but how do you then keep people engaged? Online exhibitions can also be considered, but their life and engagement with them is very different to

physical exhibitions. The final recommendations might think about using public art to engage with these topics more creatively and non-traditionally.

- It is not just about hosting an exhibition, which is temporary, but about adopting a reparative attitude, particularly towards the youth. The Sudanese partnership focused on building more resources for young people among the settled African Diaspora in Edinburgh. In addition to an exhibition, we would also need lending materials and ways to reach out to people in their homes, schools, youth groups/clubs, hospitals etc. The exhibition would therefore need a digital face. If there is no commitment from the top to support longer-term initiatives, there is not much point in doing an exhibition.
- The 'Curating Discomfort' project at The Hunterian was led by Zandra Yeaman, an anti-racist activist. She began by spending a lot of time with the Hunterian's own team to put them through a process of discomfort (workshops) that addressed issues to do with (anti-) racism and white supremacy. This then opened them up to new ways of co-curating exhibitions and narratives with the museum now more focused on inclusivity and diversity. They created a group of community curators who work in collaboration with museum curators. This is an ongoing process and is not linear: everyday things go wrong or people forget what they have learned. This is a long, generational process and one that is difficult. It is important to find people within the UoE community who can play the kind of role that Zandra played and empower them to play this role. Zandra chose the title 'curating discomfort' because that allowed her to do what she needed to do. You need people who have a deep understanding of the issues at play and are competent at running/facilitating difficult sessions, e.g. the 'donut exercise' whereby curators had to listen without speaking, to communities speaking about their experiences within the museum.
- In terms of scalability, what would this group like to achieve and in what timeframe? What can be done in the immediate, medium and long term? The Centre is something that is long term (the university will need five years), so what can we do in the short and medium term while keeping the larger project on the table? If we are talking about an ongoing curation of this work, could it be incremental? How can we turn it into a co-curated and ongoing effort? How is this going to be rewarded? Can there be certificates so that this becomes something that people aspire to obtain?

Summary of Recommendations and Goals

Following the discussion, participants organised their ideas into a web of priorities in terms of short-, medium- and long-term goals, while identifying what resourcing is needed and where collaboration needs to be built.

Short-term goals/recommendations

- Obtain a minimum ten-year commitment from the UoE to follow-up on this work.
- Add information about repatriation processes to the Anatomical Museum's website, including key contacts and expected timelines, which can be shared with descendant communities.
- Sort out governance issues relating to the Anatomical Museum and make decision-making processes about governance, repatriation and care for the ancestors much more transparent for descendant communities.

- Improve the cataloguing and descriptions of the 'collection' to make finding information easier, including finding aids.
- Ringfence money for descendant communities to visit their ancestors and continue relationship building projects with staff.
- Establish advisory boards based on the geographical areas represented by the collections to ensure community participation does not begin and end with individual repatriations.
- Address our infrastructure of support to facilitate (financially) collaborative relationships with descendant communities and other stakeholders. This includes fostering action-orientated research and seed funding.
- Ensure that any commitment to partner with communities of reparatory justice interest is built on recognised models of participation, e.g. [Arnstein's ladder of participation](#), to ensure that it is meaningful and not tokenistic.
- Stop creating short-term and precarious posts that impeded capacity building and succession.
- Hire full-time dedicated provenance researchers and repatriation officers.
- Reconsider the need for a permanent pan-African community centre based on existing templates and push this as part of the Medical School's 300-year anniversary (2026) and potential move from Teviot Place.

Medium-term goals/recommendations

- Create an accessible, searchable and digital catalogue that is designed and curated with stakeholders so that it becomes meaningful and useful to descendant communities and others, and accessible in a way that does not reproduce imperial/colonial violence in the very architecture of that cataloguing.
- Alongside descendant communities, identify ways to work more restoratively, while changing the narrative around the university (which is still about risk and loss). 'Gain' can also about ceding authority and the arts of humility in relation to working with others. While the anatomical 'collection' might be perceived as 'dangerous', it can also be appreciated as something that can be used to start dialogues that are productive.
- Shift the museum from a space of exhibiting and teaching to a space of dialogical learning using a 'living archive model', which means that all work, teaching, learning and research is conducted with the involvement of communities of reparatory justice interest.

Long-term goals/recommendations

- Set up stable infrastructures within the institution to oversee and monitor change, hold the institution to account and take seriously the need for reparatory justice.
- Work with Official Development Assistance (ODA) countries to help strengthen security and capacity for receiving returns.
- Create a research environment that fosters a more collaborative and decolonial research culture, i.e. by conducting research in partnership with, and not about, descendant communities.

Collaborations

- Consolidate and build on existing networks and alliances within the institution and between institutions so as not to duplicate efforts.
- Compile a list of critical friends and practitioners who can advise the museum on certain practices.
- Work with other institutions to better understand how collections were disbursed and find ways to be able to better track loot across different collections and institutions.

Resources

- Find out what UoE has in terms of endowments linked to slavery and colonialism and whether these could be repurposed to support reparative work.
- Work with the philanthropy funding raising department and have someone dedicated to raising funds to support the continuation of the reparative work, including returns.
- Gain commitment from UoE to resource follow-up work, noting that most funders expect match-funding from institutions.
- Work with the UoE on catalysing 'good will' and redirecting capital funds to real change projects.
- Ensure transparency by the UoE publicly declaring what it is and is not committing to from the final recommendations.
- In the absence of institutional support, look into seed funding initiatives for provenance research and assembling provenance material, e.g. Heritage Lottery Fund.
- UoE to provide financial resource for the following:
 - To facilitate collaborative relationships with descendant communities and other stakeholders, i.e. ringfencing money to enable origin communities to be able to visit, including expenses for any legal matters, visas, counselling and psychological support, etc. This is part of the university ceding power and authority to descendant communities, which will also help to build trust and prevent the inequity of asking people to work on a voluntary basis.
 - To support education and counselling for professional staff working with these 'collections'.
 - To hire a dedicated archivist skilled in anti-racist, decolonising cataloguing practices to make the current catalogue a less violence document for community groups to consult (two-year project, approx. £130,000 to get everything open, accessible, categorised).