

EDITORIAL

Editorial Foreword

2020 was a significant year for heritage issues. In the midst of (and, in some ways, precipitated by) a worldwide pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States laid bare the ongoing problem of systemic racism, which included renewed calls for the removal of monuments celebrating Confederate generals and other racist figures. Similar protests targeting monuments to White supremacy of all kinds soon spread worldwide. A statue of Edward Colston, who made his fortune in the transatlantic slave trade, was thrown into the harbor of his home town of Bristol, England, and monuments to the Belgian King Leopold II, known for his brutal subjugation of the Congolese, were defaced in cities across Belgium. Following on the heels of the 2018 Sarr-Savoy report regarding the collection of African objects in French museums, these demonstrations increased momentum for the repatriation of such colonial possessions and forced a real reckoning with the colonialist and racist legacies of academic power structures, in general, and of anthropology, in particular, with its long history of collecting human remains for study, often to bolster racist views of human biology and evolution (as in the Morton cranial collection housed at the University of Pennsylvania Museum).

In this context, it was thus particularly striking that a new book should be published aimed at introducing readers to the legal and ethical issues of repatriation, and the landmark 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), in particular, advancing the argument that repatriation is anti-science and represents a dangerous capitulation to non-Western religion.¹ While this retrograde argument is not new and has been thoroughly refuted in both practice and academic writing over the past 30 years, its restatement in a new book ostensibly for teaching students about NAGPRA and published by what appeared to be a legitimate academic press, demanded a firm rebuttal, not least because in this age of Internet searches and fetishization of the “latest word,” there is a strong likelihood that, without a response, unknowing students might mistake this book for current academic consensus and good scholarship. As a result, I invited a series of established scholars to provide counterargument to the book as well as review current thinking on NAGPRA and repatriation (of human remains, in particular). The following articles are those comments, which are being made available through Open Access in the hope that they will be read widely.

¹ Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), 16 November 1990, 104 Stat. 3048, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210729164704/https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/101/hr5237>.

Cite this article: “Editorial Foreword.” 2021. *International Journal of Cultural Property* 28, no. 2: 191. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0940739121000370>

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