

Chelsea H. Meloche, Laure Spake, and Katherine L. Nichols, eds. *Working with and for Ancestors: Collaboration in the Care and Study of Ancestral Remains*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2020. 350 pp. US \$42.36. ISBN: 9780367809317.

Reviewed by Rona Michi Ikehara-Quebral.

If I had to choose one word for the world to strive for, it would be “harmony”—harmony beyond borders, among all living creatures, and between living and nonliving things (e.g., humans and the earth). Harmony, as described by [Delle Fave \(2021:1\)](#), is a positive state of balance, a “pleasant and coherent combination of elements in a whole—an object, a landscape, a living being, a person’s behavior, and a community,” used in the social sciences to describe “a pattern of relationships within a social group and between individuals and their social context.” In a world full of discord, the repatriation of Indigenous Ancestors to their ancestral home has the potential to bring us closer to harmony.

In *Working with and for Ancestors: Collaboration in the Care and Study of Ancestral Remains*, Meloche and colleagues define repatriation as “the return of ancestral remains, cultural belongings, and other intangible heritage, such as traditional songs, stories, and/or skills” (p. 305). This volume highlights the complexities of repatriation and brings together a diverse group of 60 international contributors to not only share their experiences but offer valuable advice. At the end of each chapter, the contributors provide points to ponder. The appendices provide research options, sample questions to raise during the collaborative process, a glossary of key concepts, and resources. This book is ideal for anyone who wants to better understand the repatriation process or improve the protocols their institution already has in place.

To place repatriation in context, Meloche et al. discuss the timeline of colonialism and the collection of Indigenous remains, followed by Indigenous activism in the form of a repatriation movement. They argue that the collection and treatment of human remains for scientific research or display is inextricably connected to colonialism and the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. While repatriation movements initially received pushback from some corners of the scientific community, legislation to formalize the return of Ancestors and the development of bioarchaeological data collection standards (e.g., [Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994](#)) have resulted in an increase in repatriation and research being performed in tandem.

The first section of this edited volume opens with a discussion of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC), which was formed to bear witness to the abuse of Indigenous children, including forced separation from their families to attend residential schools, and abuse that sometimes culminated in death ([Supernant 2020:270](#)). Simons and colleagues (Chapter 1) were inspired by the TRC’s Call to Action, which implores non-

Indigenous Canadians to “seek equitable, respectful, thoughtful, and transparent partnerships as the primary means through which reconciliation may be advanced” (TRC 2015). They used ground-penetrating radar (GPR) to assist the Penelakut people of Southern Gulf Islands, B.C., to search for the unmarked graves of Indigenous children who attended Kuper Island Industrial School. Nichols (Chapter 3) also uses GPR to detect potential graves of Indigenous children and help the Sioux Valley Dakota Nation find their lost Ancestors. Nichols further provides helpful details on setting up a community-based project.

The remainder of Section 1 (Building Relationships) includes case studies from diverse institutional contexts: Okada (Chapter 2) presents a case study of the Indigenous Ainu people of northern Japan to show how universities can help reach more descendant families for repatriation. Tasa and colleagues (Chapter 4) discuss the landmark passage of a Washington State law that unified the process of handling non-forensic human remains, required tribal notification and participation, and created the first U.S. State Physical Anthropologist position within the State Historic Preservation Office. Speirs and Hodgson (Chapter 5) share their journey of assisting the Rain River First Nations to repatriate their Ancestors from the Royal Ontario Museum.

Section 2 (Caring for the Ancestors) addresses the unique challenges of “Working for Ancestors” in museum contexts. Colwell and Nash (Chapter 6) discuss The Denver Museum of Nature & Science’s journey to become compliant under the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), and their collaborations with community members to include the reburial of culturally-unaffiliated Ancestors. Aranui and Mamaku (Chapter 7) discuss the establishment of the Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme (KARP), and the return of over 500 Ancestors from over 100 institutions and other parties as a result of the partnership between KARP and the Māori of Aotearoa (New Zealand). Hayflick and Robbins (Chapter 8) review the curation policy of the Field Museum and highlight the need for sustainable collaborative programs and creative solutions. Black and McCavitt (Chapter 9) summarize the Southern African Human Remains Management Project, and the challenges they face without a legislative framework to guide this multi-nation management process. Finally, Bell and colleagues (Chapter 10) review the repatriation efforts of the Royal British Columbia Museum, whose vast collection includes over 200,000 archaeological items, 14,000 Indigenous collections, and 700 Ancestors. The museum provides a Repatriation Handbook to guide Indigenous communities and grants to support their efforts.

Section 3 (Learning from the Ancestors) addresses collaborative research. Two chapters discuss fruitful collaborations between universities and the Huron-Wendat Nation, which cede control over research permissions to the Huron Wendat, and respect the rights of Indigenous peoples to prohibit scientific destruction of ancestral remains (Forrest et al., Chapter 12 and Glencross et al., Chapter 15). Other fruitful collaborations include a partnership between the University of British Columbia Laboratory of Archaeology and the Stó:lō Nation in southwestern B.C. (Schaepe and Rowley, Chapter 11), the Metlakatla First Nation in B.C. and the Malhi Molecular Anthropology Laboratory in the U.S., where interpretation of ancient DNA results is done collaboratively (Bader et al., Chapter 13), and research partnerships with descendant communities from the Bkejwanong Territory, southwestern Ontario (Jacobs et al., Chapter 14).

Section 4 (Developing Conversations) addresses contemporary ethical challenges alongside the rapid development of technology, including digital recording methods (Spake et al., Chapter 16), the unresolved ethics of the display of human remains in museums (Tarle et al., Chapter 17), and the ethics of ancient DNA research (Walker, Chapter 19). Weisse (Chapter 18) presents Traditional Knowledge as an alternative framework to Western Scientific Knowledge, and shares how the former can be vital to repatriation efforts.

The concluding Section 5 (Moving Forward) addresses remaining challenges, such as unprovenanced remains whose identity is unclear or lost, and the need for better record-keeping by museums (Fforde et al., Chapter 20). Supernant (Chapter 21) calls on biological

anthropology and bioarchaeology to dismantle their underlying structures of settler colonialism, and emphasizes no research should be conducted without informed consent. She encourages everyone to get involved: “Listen, learn, and work toward dismantling settler colonialism yourself. Lean into the discomfort. Have the hard conversations. Be brave” (Supernant 2020:276). Kakaliouras concludes by emphasizing that the commitment to extensive dialogue in community-driven projects is invaluable, because it focuses on the descendants’ wishes and relinquishes control to them to reclaim their histories.

Repatriation requires patience, tenacity, sincerity, proactive resolution, guiding principles or an established legal framework, thoughtful collaboration, equitable partnerships, cultural sensitivity, trust-building, mutual respect, accountability, transparency, common goals, dedication, long-term curation planning, and, in order to be sustainable, a commitment of resources and time. Repatriation involves emotionally charged discussions regarding the atrocities of colonialism and the continued public display of Ancestors in museums.

The anguish felt by Indigenous communities is universal. Glen Kila, President of Koa Ike Foundation, a non-profit Native Hawaiian organization, has dedicated his life to protecting burials and *wahi pana* (sacred places), and graciously provided his perspective on the storage of ancestral remains in museums:

Iwi (bones) are sacred and revered by loved ones. We were taught the spirit of the loved one was alive in the *iwi* and should never be kept by non-family. They were talked to and treated like living family members. When *iwi* were exposed, whether by nature or development, we apologized and always said “*Aloha tupuna, e kala mai* for the disturbance, let me put you back to rest.” The *iwi* are members of our ‘*ohana* and must be treated as if they are alive. Therefore, it is wrong to destroy *iwi* for destructive analysis or keep them in museums. To hold on to some other family’s *iwi* is like taking a family member hostage. They must be respected and returned back to the land of their birth. That is what our organization does, we return *iwi* to their families and *kulaiwi*, their ancestral home. (Glen Kila, personal communication)

Repatriation requires difficult conversations in the formation of best practices. This complex, challenging process is time-consuming, stressful, and emotionally draining, but “Each time an Ancestor goes home, it is a victory” (Kakaliouras 2020:292).

The positive work of the contributors and collaborators in this edited volume collectively inspires a renewed commitment to promote the ethical treatment of Ancestors, and leads to self-reflection on how we can do better. Healing begins when Ancestors return home. While there is still much to be done, repatriation through collaboration at a global level promotes healing and brings the world one step closer to harmony, something always worth striving for.

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RONA MICHI IKEHARA-QUEBRAL
International Archaeological Research Institute, Inc.