
Before and After the Return: Repatriating Indigenous DNA

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Abstract

Session: Biomobilities – travel, movement and relationality in the emergence of contemporary biological materials and knowledges (Megan Clinch, Dez Fitzgerald, Amy Hinterberger) Recent work in the social studies of genomics has pointed to increased sharing practices and collaboration as a way to develop more ethical approaches to the interpretation and ownership of genetic samples and data. In this paper, I explore the repatriation of 883 vials of blood and accompanying documents from the University of Oxford back to the Nuu-Chah-Nulth First Nations in Canada twenty years after they were collected. By examining the travels and relations sustaining these materials, I offer an analysis of the cultural and scientific work that repatriable materials do before and after their return. In extending an analysis of repatriation to recently collected DNA for biomedical research, my first aim is to attend to the institutional relations that create the conditions for transatlantic journey and return. While the international circulation of biological samples and data from indigenous peoples in North America is not unusual, the return of it to the source community is. Moments of return reverberate beyond the case at hand and become enfolded and reactivated in current debates over ethics, identity and ownership. The second aim of the paper is to query the current thrust in contemporary genomics which seeks to bring biological materials under the domain of property in the name of ethics.

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