



Land, Artifacts, and Ancestors Back

Elizabeth Dilley

Minister and Team Leader for the Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization (MESA)

Imagine one of your great -grandparents toiled over a hand-written, illustrated copy of the Gospel of John for many years, creating radiant and reverent art to accompany the vivid imagery of John's words, hand-scribed in script from a relative you barely knew. This labor of love was stolen years later, when your entire neighborhood was ransacked and your extended family was driven out and forced to live apart from one another, apart from the land your great -grandparents and their children toiled on, and apart from all they'd known for many generations. And now imagine that you are thousands of miles from home, and you see your ancestor's gospel in a museum attributing the work to "an unknown primitive artist" as part of a "reviving cultural heritages" art exhibit.

This is not a made-up scenario, but describes the many sacred Indigenous artifacts that thousands of museums in the United States currently have their possession. Often acquired "[generations ago through exploitative purchases or grave looting](#)," museums hold community objects and religious relics of Native American tribes without permission. Worse yet, many museums hold onto bones or other funerary remains of Indigenous folk, having literally robbed graves to obtain them.

A 1990 federal law known as NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) requires institutions to make a record of their holdings available to tribes and the federal government and to work diligently towards



repatriation of those items. As you might well imagine, the work is slow-going, meets with near-continual institutional resistance rooted in white supremacy, and is grossly under-funded. As a local example, the Cleveland (Ohio) Museum of Natural History has made available 0% of the more than 400 Native American remains it has reported to the government. (You can find information on institutions near you at [this ProPublica site](#).)

Reasons for these delays given by various institutions include, “We don’t have local tribes here to communicate with”; “we don’t know precisely who these remains are of, so we don’t want to return them to a non-family or incorrect tribe”; “this is too expensive”; “they will degrade if they leave the careful curation of our institution.” Again, imagine that they are talking about your great grandparents’ hand-written Gospel of John (and maybe even the bones of your ancestors). What do those excuses sound like in your ears?

In a time where Indigenous communities are calling for land return, I hope to respectfully add to that chorus a call to return the bones of ancestors to their people and the return of sacred objects to their rightful communities. If those communities want to work with museums to co-create culturally sensitive exhibits, let that be a decision of the tribes rather than the white institutions that currently hold possession of these objects. And if you want to learn more, I highly recommend reading from ProPublica’s massive reporting, contained in [The Repatriation Project](#), and finding ways to connect with tribal communities near you to listen and learn about their goals and priorities related to NAGPRA. Not all tribes agree on what needs to be done, but all them affirm that their voices need to be included in these conversations, and their wisdom respected about their sacred objects and ancestors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Elizabeth Dilley serves as the Minister and Team Leader for the Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization (MESA) team in the National Setting of the United Church of Christ.

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