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Narrative as Scientific Evidence: Identifying Black Humanities in the Study and Return of Anatomical Others

This talk presents an ethical methodology for studying the lives of Black people whose remains are in the William Montague Cobb skeletal collection. This work is part of a three-fold agenda that: 1) brings scientifically oriented studies of Black lives in closer proximity to studies produced in the arts, humanities and broader social sciences; 2) critically evaluates the need to continue research on the remains of people in collections born of Western scientific racism and colonialism; and 3) naturalizes descendant community involvement in processes of research and return.

Drawing upon Black feminist scholarship, I use cross-disciplinary sources to construct narrative evidence of biological and social well-being, thus illustrating the limits of scientific translation. For instance, documents associated with individuals in the Cobb collection support biocultural studies within and outside the scope of skeletal biology. Therefore, engagement with scholarship from other disciplines focused on the embodied experiences of Black people is necessary. Furthermore, this literacy is required to ethically assess how studies of people in anatomical collections shed light on Black lived experiences, compared to re/producing racially ordered, scientific knowledge. Ethical assessment also demands engagement and leadership by descendant communities to determine research directions, interment, and other means of restoration – including the cessation of research. I discuss engagement plans for the Cobb collection, along with their broader implications for engagement, research and teaching within and between communities, universities and museums.

Ultimately, I argue that the limits of scientific realism require ethical orientations that not only address research practices, but also support reimagining laboratories as spaces of engagement, interdisciplinarity and impermanence.