

A Note on Terms

Provenance research typically centres tracing the history of particular objects. Those objects may be parts of people, and those parts may be regarded as people or otherwise animate by some. This poses questions about how such so-called objects should be referred to. Using the term *object* might not just be inaccurate; it might also risk, as von Bose writes in his chapter in this volume, ‘conceal[ing] the process of having been *made* into an object [...] [and of] having been de-subjectified’ (see also the discussions by Adler and Hulverscheidt). For this reason – in order to try to avoid continuing and even reinforcing objectification and depersonalization – Adler tries to avoid the pronoun *it* (preferring the singular *they*) for the human skull with which he works. Ideally, perhaps, the name of the person whose skull it was would be used, but this is precisely what is missing from the record. Moreover, some might consider using a person’s name in relation to a non-living body part to be not so much an addition of personhood to the body part as a diminution of personhood. Clearly, these are complicated matters in which, we argue, it is important to consider the specific cultural ontologies likely to be involved.

Human remains has become the most widely used term to refer to body parts of people no longer living, with terms such as *human skull* to refer to specific parts.¹ As with the term *object*, however, these might be regarded as failing to sufficiently recognize that these were parts of particular persons – by referring to them in terms of general categories and in the language of scientific discourse. For Maori and Moriori, for instance, and for those in Kunze’s chapter here, these are ancestors, and thus this is the term that Kunze uses.

Because of the complexity of the issues and their context-dependency, this volume does not seek to standardize any particular terms or uses; instead, each author uses the terms they feel most appropriate to the circumstances of their work.

[1] For further discussion of this term, see Larissa Förster, ‘Talking and Going About Things Differently: On Changing Vocabularies and Practices in the Postcolonial Provenance and Restitution Debates’, in *Doing Diversity in Museums and Heritage: A Berlin Ethnography*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2023), 57–75.



Alternative portrait of a skull in a box, 2025. © Tal Adler