

Living Repatriation and the Reconstruction of Peoplehood

Return Is Not Complete Until It Becomes Livable

Christopher Knorr

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Abstract

This article develops *living repatriation* as a repair framework for cases in which colonial harm damaged not only Native lands, ancestors, objects, records, children, language, or jurisdiction, but the living pathways through which Native peoples remain connected to themselves across generations. Existing repatriation frameworks rightly focus on the return of ancestors, funerary objects, sacred objects, cultural patrimony, records, land, and authority. Yet return may remain partial where the institutions, memory-bearing forms, language pathways, family relations, and governance capacities needed to make return livable remain broken, under-resourced, or externally controlled. Living repatriation names the reconstruction of usable, self-governed, and durable pathways through which Native peoples repair damaged continuity on their own terms. It requires tools, authority, memory-bearing forms, protected conditions, non-coercive pathways, and people-rooted answerability. It is sufficiently present, as a repair threshold, when those elements form practical pathways for repairing and transmitting living continuity across generations. The concept is offered not as forced return, racial sorting, nostalgia, unrestricted disclosure, a blame claim, or a replacement for existing repatriation law, but as a criterion for evaluating whether return has become livable.

Keywords: living repatriation; peoplehood; Native sovereignty; repatriation; NAGPRA; ICWA; Indigenous data sovereignty; Native archives; language revitalization; continuity-damage; protected conditions.

Introduction: Return Is Not Complete Until It Becomes Livable

Repatriation is usually understood as return.

Something was taken, removed, stolen, displaced, catalogued, buried elsewhere, held elsewhere, renamed, archived, possessed, or governed by someone who had no rightful authority over it. Repatriation names the demand that it be brought back. In Native American history, this language carries particular weight. It evokes ancestors removed from their resting places, funerary objects, sacred objects, cultural patrimony, records held outside the people they concern, lands occupied under foreign authority, and jurisdiction

interrupted by colonial law.¹

These forms of return matter. They are not symbolic gestures. They concern ancestors, obligations, law, grief, ceremony, memory, governance, and responsibility. To return an ancestor is not merely to move remains from one place to another. To return a sacred object is not merely to transfer possession. To return records is not merely to provide information. To restore jurisdiction is not merely to adjust administration. Each return can carry a world of relation.

This article does not speak for all Native nations, prescribe one model of belonging, or claim authority over any people's internal protocols of repair. Native peoples have distinct histories, laws, kinship structures, languages, cultural authorities, forms of governance, and ways of understanding relation. The purpose here is narrower: to offer a repair criterion. Where colonial harm damaged the pathways of peoplehood, repatriation should be evaluated not only by whether something returns, but by whether Native peoples have usable, self-governed, and durable pathways to make return livable.

I use the phrase *living repatriation* in a specific theoretical sense: the reconstruction of usable, self-governed, and durable pathways through which Native peoples repair damaged continuity on their own terms. The phrase may resonate with existing Indigenous, museum, archival, and cultural heritage discussions, but the use here is focused on a particular problem: what repatriation requires when the harm was not only removal of a thing, but damage to the living conditions through which return could become meaningful.

The central question is this: what happens when the thing damaged was not only an object, ancestor, record, parcel of land, or legal authority, but the living continuity of a people?

What does repatriation mean when colonial systems did not merely take things from Native peoples, but damaged the relations through which Native peoples remain connected to themselves across time?

¹The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act regulations recognize rights concerning Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony, and provide processes to protect and restore those materials to lineal descendants, Indian Tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations. 43 C.F.R. Part 10, especially §10.1(a). Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, "Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Regulations," current as of June 2026, <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-43/subtitle-A/part-10>.

This article begins from that question.

The central claim is simple: **return is not complete until it becomes livable.**

Repatriation, understood fully, is not only the return of what was taken. It is also the restoration of the living capacity to belong, remember, protect, transmit, and govern together.

I. The Missing Case: Continuity-Damage

Colonial harm did not only remove. It interrupted.

It did not only seize. It separated.

It did not only possess. It reorganized the conditions under which Native people could know themselves, find one another, govern one another, protect one another, remember one another, and transmit obligations across generations.

This article calls that deeper injury *continuity-damage*.

Continuity-damage is harm to the pathways through which a people remains connected to itself across time. It may appear through removal from land, child removal, boarding schools, allotment, language suppression, archival displacement, jurisdictional fragmentation, administrative misclassification, or under-resourced institutions of cultural repair.

Removal from land was also removal from relation. Land is not merely a surface on which a population resides. Land can hold burial, food, medicine, water, law, ceremony, economy, kinship, story, and responsibility. To remove people from land is therefore not only to change location. It is to damage the lived relation between people and place.

Boarding schools make continuity-damage especially visible. They did not only educate children into another language. They cut children away from family, home, language, place, ceremony, memory, and ordinary forms of intergenerational teaching. A child could survive the school and still return to damaged pathways. The harm was not exhausted by physical absence. It reached into speech, trust, kinship, grief, and the transmission of belonging.²

²The Department of the Interior's 2024 Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report, Volume II, updated the official list of federal boarding schools to 417 institutions

Child welfare systems also show why continuity-damage cannot be reduced to individual injury. When children are separated from family, tribe, culture, language, and political community, the injury does not remain private. It can reach the continuity of a people across generations. This is why Indian child welfare law is not merely about placement preference. It recognizes a connection between Indian children, tribal stability, family continuity, and the future of Native nations.³

Allotment did not only divide land. It translated collective relation into individual property categories, rolls, titles, fractions, and administrative forms. It made Native people legible through systems that often weakened the collective structures that made land meaningful as more than property.

Archives did not only preserve. They also renamed, categorized, misclassified, relocated, restricted, and controlled memory. A record may preserve a name while also distorting the relation the name carried. A file may help a family reconnect while also forcing that family to pass through outside institutions to recover what should never have been severed.

Jurisdictional fragmentation did not only divide authority. It weakened channels of protection and accountability. A people can be formally recognized and still have the practical exercise of authority strained by external law, underfunding, divided jurisdiction, and institutional dependency.

The downstream harm is therefore not captured by the sentence, “Something was taken.”

The deeper statement is: **the pathways of return were damaged.**

That is the missing case. It is the case in which return of a thing matters, but cannot by itself repair the living field around the thing. An ancestor may return, but the community may still need ceremony, privacy, staff, memory-bearing forms, teaching, and space. A language may be documented, but still lack speakers, teachers, learners, and institutions of transmission. Records

across 37 states or then-territories and confirmed that at least 973 American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children died while attending federal Indian boarding schools. U.S. Department of the Interior, *Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report*, vol. 2 (2024), 5, 16, https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/media_document/doi_federal_indian_boarding_school_initiative_investigative_report_vii_final_508_compliant.pdf.

³The Indian Child Welfare Act declares a national policy “to protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families” through minimum federal standards for removal and placement and assistance for tribal child and family service programs. 25 U.S.C. §1902, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/25/1902>.

may exist, but remain inaccessible, externally governed, misclassified, or unsafe. A cultural office may exist, but lack the staff, authority, funding, or protection required to carry continuity. A child may be legally protected in principle, while the family and tribal systems needed to sustain connection remain strained.

Living repatriation names this downstream field of repair.

It asks not only: **what must be returned?**

It also asks: **what must be rebuilt so return becomes livable?**

II. Living Repatriation

Living repatriation is the reconstruction of peoplehood after rupture.

It does not mean that living Native people are objects to be returned. It does not mean forced return into a community, identity, enrollment category, ceremonial life, family relation, or political status. It does not authorize the state, a tribe, an archive, a museum, a family, or any institution to coerce belonging.

Living repatriation repairs pathways of return. It does not impose return.

This distinction is essential because colonial systems often used coercion in the name of improvement, civilization, education, protection, or administration. A repair theory cannot reproduce coercion in the name of healing. Living repatriation must therefore be non-coercive. It creates conditions under which reconnection can become possible. It does not command reconnection. It makes return livable for those who seek it, need it, inherit it, or are responsible to it, while recognizing that return may be partial, contested, gradual, painful, private, or refused.

Nor is living repatriation a blame framework. It does not begin by accusing a particular tribe, department, council, family, office, archive, museum, or agency. It begins by asking what repair requires. A people may value heritage while lacking the protected conditions needed to sustain heritage work. A language program may be loved and still lack teachers. A heritage office may be important and still lack stable funding. A family-history project may be necessary and still depend on one overburdened person. A tribe may hold sovereignty and still confront the damaged pathways that colonial history left behind.

The purpose is not blame. The purpose is diagnosis.

Living repatriation asks whether Native peoples have the tools, authority, memory-bearing forms, and protected conditions to repair living continuity on their own terms.

This makes living repatriation a companion to People-Rooted Sovereignty. People-Rooted Sovereignty asks what makes sovereignty meaningfully exercisable now. It begins from the claim that sovereignty is rooted in the people, not created by outside recognition. But for sovereignty to remain livable, peoplehood must have usable pathways through which it can be carried forward.

Living Repatriation asks the repair-side question: what must be rebuilt when the continuity needed to exercise sovereignty has been damaged?

The two concepts meet at one point: peoplehood must be more than a formal status. It must be livable, transmissible, protected, and answerable through the ordinary and institutional forms by which a people remains connected to itself. This understanding sits near peoplehood theory, which treats language, sacred history, ceremonial life, and territory or place as interrelated elements of Native peoplehood.⁴

III. What Living Repatriation Requires

If living repatriation is the repair of damaged peoplehood continuity, then it requires more than recognition. Without real conditions, repatriation can remain symbolic. A return can occur without becoming usable. A value can be praised without being institutionally protected. A memory-bearing form can exist without reconnecting anyone. A language can be documented without being transmitted. A right can be recognized without being practically exercisable.

Living repatriation requires at least six things: tools, authority, memory-bearing forms, protected conditions, non-coercive pathways, and people-rooted answerability.

⁴Thomas Holm, J. Diane Pearson, and Ben Chavis argue that the elements of peoplehood include language, sacred history, religion or ceremonial cycle, and land or territory as a complete system for American Indian Studies. Thomas Holm, J. Diane Pearson, and Ben Chavis, "Peoplehood: A Model for the Extension of Sovereignty in American Indian Studies," *Wicazo Sa Review* 18, no. 1 (2003): 7-24; ERIC record, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ675322>.

Condition	What it prevents
Tools	Symbolic repair without working instruments
Authority	Externally managed repair
Memory-bearing forms	Continuity rupture without recoverable pathways of memory
Protected conditions	Fragile repair dependent on temporary luck
Non-coercive pathways	Repair becoming domination
People-rooted answerability	Repair becoming unaccountable power

It requires **tools** because repair cannot happen through aspiration alone. Native peoples need practical instruments through which memory, relation, language, family, law, place, and responsibility can be recovered, protected, transmitted, and governed. These tools may include archives, cultural protocols, language programs, elder-recording projects, youth education, family-history systems, repatriation offices, heritage departments, oral-history methods, legal strategies, digital infrastructure, maps, curricula, data-governance systems, and community processes.

These tools are not decorative. They are continuity instruments. A language archive is not merely a collection. It can become a tool of transmission. A family-history project is not merely genealogy. It can become a tool of reconnection. A heritage department is not merely a cultural office. It can become a tool through which a people preserves memory, protects records, carries language, supports repatriation, assists families, and connects youth to inherited responsibility.

Living repatriation also requires **authority** because repair cannot remain externally managed. Colonial harm often worked by placing Native peoples under outside systems of decision: outside governments, outside schools, outside archives, outside courts, outside museums, outside categories, outside records, and outside administrative standards. If repair remains governed by those same external structures, repatriation risks repeating the form of the injury even while trying to correct its content.

Authority means Native peoples must govern the repair process themselves. This includes authority over interpretation, access, classification, records, cultural materials, language materials, family histories, protocols, sacred knowledge, repatriation processes, archival return, data governance, and institu-

tional priorities. Indigenous data sovereignty gives contemporary language to this authority in the data context: Native nations and Indigenous peoples must govern the collection, ownership, and application of data about themselves.⁵

Living repatriation requires **memory-bearing forms** because continuity needs ways to carry memory across rupture. Records matter, but they are not the only form through which Native continuity is carried. Memory-bearing forms may include written records, oral histories, place names, family accounts, language materials, ceremonial protocols, community memory, maps, songs, burial knowledge, kinship knowledge, photographs, letters, tribal documents, federal documents, museum records, church records, cemetery records, and protected forms of cultural transmission.

This phrase matters because living repatriation should not reduce Native continuity to documentary proof. Some forms of knowledge are oral. Some are ceremonial. Some are familial. Some are place-based. Some are held by particular cultural authorities. Some should not be public. Some should not be digitized. Some should not be forced into bureaucratic categories. To say that living repatriation requires memory-bearing forms is to say that continuity needs ways to remember and reconnect, not that all continuity must be validated by external records.

Records remain important. In the context of living repatriation, records matter because rupture often damages the ability to know. A family may not know where a child was taken. A community may not know where language materials were stored. A tribe may not have access to records held by agencies, schools, churches, museums, universities, or private collectors. A person may know they belong, but lack access to the records through which an external system demands proof.

But records are double-edged. They can repair, but they can also harm. They can misclassify. They can rename. They can erase. They can expose sensitive knowledge. They can reduce relation to bureaucratic proof. They can preserve the viewpoint of the institution that caused the rupture. They can make Native people dependent on colonial categories in order to recover Native

⁵The Native Nations Institute defines Indigenous data sovereignty as the right of a nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data, deriving from tribes' inherent right to govern peoples, lands, and resources. Native Nations Institute, "Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance," University of Arizona, <https://nni.arizona.edu/our-work/research-policy-analysis/indigenous-data-sovereignty-governance>.

continuity.

For that reason, living repatriation does not require records in a crude evidentiary sense only. It requires answerable memory-bearing forms. These forms are governed in ways that serve Native continuity. They are not simply extracted, displayed, digitized, or centralized. They are handled according to people-rooted authority, cultural protocols, privacy concerns, family responsibilities, and community needs. Native archival protocols support this point by centering culturally responsive care and by recognizing that each tribe, band, and community is unique.⁶

Living repatriation requires answerable records, not exposed records. It does not require unrestricted access, full transparency, or public disclosure. Some knowledge must remain protected. The question is not whether everything can be opened, but whether access, restriction, interpretation, and use are governed by the people whose continuity is at stake.

Living repatriation requires **protected conditions** because repair must survive time. A fragile repair pathway is not enough. Living continuity cannot depend entirely on one grant cycle, one exhausted staff member, one elder, one volunteer, one sympathetic administrator, one political moment, or one temporary program.

Protected conditions are the institutional, political, material, and procedural supports that allow repair work to persist. They include stable funding, trained personnel, succession planning, secure archives, access protocols, cultural protections, community accountability, intergenerational pathways, grant capacity, legal support, technical infrastructure, and protection from short-term political swings.

This condition matters because Native continuity has often survived through extraordinary personal sacrifice. Elders, cultural workers, language keepers, family historians, tribal staff, activists, and community members have carried immense burdens with limited support. Living repatriation should not romanticize that exhaustion. It should ask what must be protected so continuity

⁶The Protocols for Native American Archival Materials state that they guide libraries and archives in culturally responsive care of Native American archival materials and culturally appropriate service to communities, and emphasize that each tribe, band, and community is unique. First Archivists Circle, *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* (2007); Society of American Archivists standard page, <https://www2.archivists.org/standards/protocols-for-native-american-archival-materials>.

work does not depend on burning people out.

The institutions that carry continuity must be protected, not merely praised. Tribal Historic Preservation Offices, heritage departments, cultural offices, language programs, archives, and repatriation programs can become continuity infrastructure when they carry memory, place, records, language, cultural materials, and historic preservation responsibilities.⁷

Living repatriation also requires **non-coercive pathways** because living people are not objects of return. Living repatriation does not authorize a tribe, state, institution, family, or outside authority to force a person into identity, enrollment, ceremony, community, political belonging, family relation, or cultural practice.

Living repatriation concerns the repair of pathways, not the ownership of persons.

It creates conditions under which reconnection can become possible. It does not command reconnection. Some people may return through language. Some through family history. Some through ceremony. Some through political belonging. Some through memory-bearing forms. Some through land. Some through service. Some through grief. Some may remain uncertain. Some may not return at all.

Finally, living repatriation requires **people-rooted answerability** because repair must remain accountable to those whose continuity is being repaired. A repair process can fail even when it has tools, authority, memory-bearing forms, and funding if it becomes bureaucratic, elite-controlled, extractive, opaque, politicized, or detached from families and communities.

People-rooted answerability means that repair must be responsive to the Native people, families, elders, cultural authorities, communities, and tribal governance structures that hold responsibility for continuity. It must be capable of correction. It must have channels for affected people to raise concerns, contest misuse, contribute knowledge, protect sensitive materials, and shape how repair proceeds.

⁷The National Park Service describes Tribal Historic Preservation Offices as officially designated by tribes, serving preservation functions comparable to State Historic Preservation Offices, advising on tribal historic properties and Section 106 reviews, and receiving support through the Tribal Historic Preservation Program and grant funding. National Park Service, "Tribal Historic Preservation Office Program," last updated August 1, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/historicpreservationfund/tribal-historic-preservation-office-program.htm>.

A repair process that is not answerable to the people it claims to repair risks reproducing the same logic of dispossession.

IV. When Living Repatriation Is Sufficiently Present

The necessary conditions identify what living repatriation requires. But the concept also needs a threshold for when living repatriation is sufficiently present as a repair practice.

That threshold is this:

Living repatriation is sufficiently present, as a repair threshold, when Native peoples have usable, self-governed, and durable pathways for repairing and transmitting living continuity across generations.

This does not mean every harm has been healed. It does not require a return to an untouched past. It does not require every memory-bearing form to be recovered, every person to reconnect, every language to be fully restored, or every internal disagreement to disappear.

It is not sufficient for total justice. It is not sufficient for complete healing. It is not sufficient for full sovereignty. It is not sufficient for complete repatriation in every sense.

It is sufficient for saying that living repatriation has crossed from aspiration into meaningful practice.

The pathway must be **usable**. People must be able to access it, understand it, participate in it, and rely on it. A formal right that cannot be exercised is not enough. A program that exists only in name is not enough. A memory-bearing form that cannot be found, interpreted, protected, or governed is not enough.

The pathway must be **self-governed**. Native peoples must control the terms of repair. Partnerships with museums, agencies, universities, funders, lawyers, archivists, or technical specialists may be useful, but the governing authority over meaning, access, protocol, priority, and use must remain people-rooted.

The pathway must be **durable**. It must survive time. It does not need to be permanent in one rigid form, but it must not depend entirely on temporary luck. It needs enough continuity of funding, personnel, protocol, authority, memory-bearing forms, training, and intergenerational transmission to

remain available beyond a single grant, staff member, officeholder, elder, or political moment.

Living repatriation is not complete healing.

It is the protected capacity to repair.

This standard is modest and demanding at the same time. It is modest because it does not promise total restoration. It does not pretend colonial rupture can be undone in a final way. It does not treat Native peoples as museum pieces moving backward through time. It allows for adaptation, disagreement, loss, invention, and future-making.

But it is demanding because it refuses symbolic repair. It refuses to say that return is complete when the thing has changed hands but the people still lack the capacity to make return livable. It refuses to praise continuity while leaving the institutions of continuity exposed. It refuses to call memory repaired when the forms that carry memory remain externally controlled. It refuses to call language restored when it is only stored. It refuses to call sovereignty livable when the pathways of peoplehood remain damaged.

The repair threshold is crossed when Native peoples possess the tools, authority, memory-bearing forms, protected conditions, non-coercive pathways, and answerable governance needed to make continuity repair usable, self-governed, and durable.

V. Where Living Repatriation Becomes Visible

Living repatriation becomes clearest when we look at the institutions and practices that carry continuity.

Memory-bearing forms are one example. In Native history, records, oral histories, names, places, songs, maps, family accounts, language materials, and community memory can help families reconnect with removals, adoptions, school histories, burial locations, kinship lines, and cultural responsibilities. But these forms can also be distorted, restricted, exposed, or controlled. Written records can misclassify. Archives can rename. Databases can detach knowledge from protocol. Digitization can widen access while weakening protection. Living repatriation therefore requires answerable memory-bearing forms: forms governed so that they repair relation rather than deepen depen-

dency.

Language shows the same point in another form. A language can be documented and still not be livingly transmitted. A dictionary, recording, or archive matters, but preservation is not the same as continuity. The Native American Languages Act provides a legal-policy anchor for the right to use, practice, and develop Native languages; living repatriation pushes the question further into transmission: whether people have usable, self-governed, and durable pathways to learn, speak, teach, and carry language forward.⁸

Heritage departments and cultural offices show the institutional side of the same problem. These offices may carry records, repatriation files, language materials, elder knowledge, place-based memory, cultural education, family history, and youth connection. They are not decorative. They can be continuity infrastructure. When such institutions are underfunded, understaffed, or politically exposed, the issue is not simply administrative weakness. The pathway of repair itself becomes fragile. To name that fragility is not to blame the people or the office. It is to say that continuity work requires continuity-level support.

Child welfare shows the living stakes. When Native children are separated from family, tribe, language, place, and cultural relation, the injury is not only individual. It reaches the continuity of a people. Repair therefore requires legal, familial, cultural, and institutional pathways through which children remain connected to peoplehood. Living repatriation in this context means that children are not severed from the relations that help make belonging livable.

The return of ancestors and cultural items shows why ordinary repatriation and living repatriation belong together. The return itself matters. It is necessary. But return can also open responsibilities of ceremony, grief, teaching, privacy, protection, and intergenerational care. Living repatriation asks what must exist around return for it to become livable.

Data sovereignty shows that living repatriation is not only about the past. Na-

⁸The Native American Languages Act declares a federal policy to preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages. 25 U.S.C. §2903; see also findings at 25 U.S.C. §2901, including Congress's finding that Native languages are integral to cultures and identities and are a medium for transmission of Native cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values. <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?edition=prelim&path=/prelim@title25/chapter31>.

tive continuity is increasingly mediated by databases, metadata, archives, research files, health records, enrollment systems, museum catalogs, and digital repositories. These systems can support repair, but they can also reproduce extraction and misclassification if Native peoples do not govern them. Data is not merely technical. It shapes how a people is remembered, counted, interpreted, protected, and made available to itself. Living repatriation therefore requires Native authority over the knowledge systems through which continuity is recorded and carried forward.

Across these examples, the same pattern appears.

Return is not enough if it remains unusable. Recognition is not enough if it lacks instruments. Memory-bearing forms are not enough if they are not answerable. Preservation is not enough if it does not become transmission. Heritage is not enough if it is not protected. Repair becomes living repatriation only when Native peoples have usable, self-governed, and durable pathways to reconnect, remember, protect, transmit, and govern continuity across generations.

VI. Safeguards

Because living repatriation expands the language of repatriation, it must be carefully bounded.

First, living repatriation is not forced return. It does not compel Native people into identity, community, ceremony, family relation, political belonging, or cultural practice. It creates pathways of return without imposing return.

Second, living repatriation is not racial sorting or a purity test. It does not ask the state to decide who belongs. It does not reduce Native peoplehood to biology, blood, paperwork, or external recognition. It asks how Native peoples can govern their own repair pathways.

Third, living repatriation is not nostalgia for a frozen past. Native peoples are living peoples. Continuity does not mean stasis. It means the ability to carry memory, law, relation, adaptation, and responsibility forward.

Fourth, living repatriation is not a replacement for existing repatriation law or practice. The return of ancestors, sacred objects, cultural items, records, land, and jurisdiction remains necessary. Living repatriation deepens the question

by asking what must exist so those returns can live.

Fifth, living repatriation is not a blame game. It does not accuse Native communities when continuity institutions are underfunded or strained. Many of those conditions are themselves downstream effects of colonial history, federal policy, economic constraint, jurisdictional fragmentation, and administrative burden. The concept asks what repair requires, not whom to condemn.

Sixth, living repatriation does not impose one model of Native belonging. Native nations have different histories, laws, kinship structures, cultural protocols, enrollment rules, forms of governance, and ways of understanding relation. Living repatriation names the form of repair, but each Native people must govern the substance of that repair.

Seventh, living repatriation does not require unrestricted disclosure. It requires answerable protection. Some knowledge should remain restricted. Some records belong under family, ceremonial, cultural, or tribal authority. Some materials should not be digitized, displayed, or opened to public access. Repair is not exposure. Repair requires that access, restriction, use, and interpretation be governed by the people whose continuity is at stake.

These safeguards do not weaken the concept. They make it durable.

Living repatriation must be strong enough to name downstream harm, but careful enough not to reproduce the coercive, classificatory, extractive, or externalizing logics it seeks to repair.

VII. People-Rooted Sovereignty and the Repair of Continuity

Living Repatriation belongs beside People-Rooted Sovereignty.

People-Rooted Sovereignty begins from the premise that sovereignty is rooted in the people. It is not created by external recognition, even though external recognition may affect how sovereignty is treated in law. Sovereignty is not merely a status held above the people. It must remain meaningfully exercisable, accountable, and corrigible in lived governance.

But colonial harm can damage the pathways through which peoplehood remains livable. It can scatter memory-bearing forms, interrupt language, strain

families, relocate knowledge, divide jurisdiction, weaken institutions, and force Native peoples to recover continuity through external systems.

This is where living repatriation enters.

People-Rooted Sovereignty asks: **what makes sovereignty meaningfully exercisable now?**

Living Repatriation asks: **what must be rebuilt when the continuity needed to exercise sovereignty has been damaged?**

The first is a governance-side question. The second is a repair-side question.

Together, they say: sovereignty is rooted in the people, but peoplehood must be carried through living pathways. If those pathways are damaged, repair must restore the capacity to belong, remember, protect, transmit, and govern together.

This is why living repatriation is not only about the past. It is about the present structure of repair. Colonial harm continues downstream when Native peoples must rely on broken, external, inaccessible, or under-resourced systems to recover what should never have been severed. The harm persists when memory-bearing forms exist but cannot be used. It persists when language is documented but not transmitted. It persists when ancestors are returned but the community infrastructure for ceremony, memory, and teaching remains unsupported. It persists when children are legally protected in principle but the family, cultural, and jurisdictional systems needed to keep them connected are strained. It persists when sovereignty is affirmed in formal terms but continuity work remains politically exposed.

To speak of living repatriation is to name that downstream field.

It is to say that return is not complete when possession changes hands. Return becomes real when the people have the protected capacity to make continuity livable again.

Conclusion: The Reconstruction of Peoplehood

Repatriation is usually understood as return. That meaning remains necessary. Ancestors should return. Sacred objects should return. Cultural patrimony should return. Records should return. Land and jurisdiction should be

restored where they have been wrongfully taken or interrupted.

But where colonial systems damaged living continuity, return must reach deeper than possession.

It must reach the pathways through which a people remains connected to itself across time.

Living repatriation names that deeper repair. It is the reconstruction of peoplehood after rupture. It asks whether Native peoples have usable, self-governed, and durable pathways to reconnect, remember, protect, transmit, and govern continuity on their own terms.

It does not require perfect healing. It does not impose belonging. It does not turn living people into objects of return. It does not blame communities for scarcity. It does not freeze Native peoples in the past. It does not replace existing repatriation work. It does not expose protected knowledge in the name of repair.

It asks a more basic question: **has return become livable?**

If the answer is no, then repatriation may have begun, but it remains incomplete.

If the answer is yes, then repair has crossed an important threshold. The thing returned is no longer isolated from the people. The memory-bearing form is no longer merely held. The language is no longer merely stored. The institution is no longer merely symbolic. The child is no longer treated as severable from peoplehood. The data is no longer merely extracted. The sovereignty is no longer merely formal.

Return has become connected to living capacity.

That is the work living repatriation names: the restoration of the capacity to belong, remember, protect, transmit, and govern together.

Return is not complete until it becomes livable.

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