Losing Your Marbles and Other Cultural Objects

Three Case Studies in Repatriation
Repatriation: The Basics

- Museums will possess stolen art
- Cultural patrimony
- Cultural property
- For museum directors, short-term benefits no longer outweigh long-term costs
- Hague 1954
- UNESCO 1970
What are the Elgin Marbles

- Symbol of objects that have not been repatriated
- Series of marbles friezes in the Parthenon erected in 5th Century BCE as a temple to Athena
Removal of the Marbles

- Removed by Thomas Bruce
- July 1, 1801 - Elgin asked for permission to enter Parthenon to draw and make plaster models of sculptures
- Unclear whether the Ottomans gave Elgin permission to remove the marbles
Early Controversy

• 1815-questions raised in House of Commons over whether or not Elgin had exceeded his authority
• Parliament voted in favor of purchasing the marbles 82 to 30
Nazi Era Art Theft

• Unprecedented scale also much more methodical than what came before
• Laws passed stripping Jews of property
• Jews forced to sell paintings to escape
Post-War Challenges

• Lack of a central authority to arbitrate claims for artwork
• Pieces of artwork dispersed throughout the world
• Records in a number of different countries, many sealed off during Cold War
What Is NAGPRA

- Signed on November 16 1990
- NAGPRA: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act
- Exemptions: objects found after 1990 on state-owned lands, items acquired in private collections before 1990, or objects found on private land
Successful Repatriation

• National Museum of the American Indian in New York City
• *Ahayu:da* = protectors of Zuni tribe
• 80 missing Zuni war gods
Anti-NAGPRA

- Major difference between other countries law and NAGPRA
- NAGPRA harms study/research