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Remembering Humanity: How to Include Human Values in a Scientific Endeavor

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> *Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.*
>
> George Orwell

The *Bonnichsen* decision has been heralded as a victory for anthropology, because it appears to vindicate the position of the plaintiffs who brought their suit in order to be allowed to conduct scientific research on a 9,000-year-old skeleton from North America. It appears to be a defeat for Native Americans, who view this skeleton as an ancestor and who would prefer to see the remains of this individual returned to the ground to continue the long journey back to the earth. In fact, this polarized view of the case returns the discourse surrounding repatriation to a previous level in which arguments were made over the question, "who owns the past?" While this may be a rhetorically satisfying problem to wrestle with, it does not capture the true nature of how archaeology can engage with Native people in the process of understanding ancient lives. It presumes that the past exists as a form of property. Under this simplistic construction, human remains can exist as property and can be owned by one group or another.

While it appears that the skeleton found near Kennewick, Washington, is now owned by science, this is inaccurate. Similarly, the life stories of ancient Native Americans belong to themselves, and it is our privilege as archaeologists to be able to sometimes understand and listen to them. It is my own privilege as a Native American to know that the lives of these ancestors have fed into my own. With regard to this one overly litigated individual, we must all remember that Kennewick Man existed and behaved as a human being, not as someone or some*thing* that would one day become only archaeological data. Like all other human beings, he belongs only to himself.

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I maintain that the past is not something to be owned but something to be respectful towards. At the present time, mainstream archaeology has not yet embraced a methodology that can accommodate this point of view. The emerging field of Indigenous archaeology, or community-based archaeology, represents an attempt to practice this scientific discipline within the ethical boundaries that retain the humanity of those we study. The *Bonnichsen* decision, although divisive, has clearly demonstrated the need for a new way of working with communities. In this comment, I would like to explain some of the tensions that have existed between archaeologists and Native peoples and how these played out in the debate over the proper disposition of the skeleton known as the Kennewick Man.

What many archaeologists do not realize is that our scholarship is a form of controlling the past. Because we operate under the authority of science, we are seen as having insight into a sort of truth about ancient lives that can be in conflict with those truths espoused by Native peoples who may, in fact, be descended from the individuals we study. For much of its life, archaeology has been able to ignore the existence of these (alter)Native truths and has been the primary resource by which the public understands ancient Native American lives. With the passage of laws such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), archaeology has been challenged to demonstrate what was once taken for granted: that this science acts in the public interest.

Archaeology has come to be viewed by many Native Americans as another remnant of the American colonialist past. Subsequently, many Native American people view its practice with skepticism and its product as divorced from Indigenous needs and desires. There exists, however, an unspoken intersection of the knowledge that is produced by archaeologists and the needs of Native Americans to maintain and continue our own histories. Archaeologists believe that the understanding of the ancient ones is reason enough to continue our work. Native Americans know that we must continue to speak about our ancestors in order to give them the honor they are owed for producing our own lives and cultures. The difference in the relationships that exist with the ancient ones of this continent lead to different ways of behaving with regard to them.

I first became aware of the case involving the Ancient One, or the Kennewick skeleton, when I was in graduate school and only just beginning to identify myself as an archaeologist. I have, of course, always been Native American and never dreamed that these two aspects of my identity would come into conflict. I believed that the resolution of this dispute would come through consultation among all the involved parties, as the NAGPRA directs archaeologists to consult with tribes regarding human remains. Instead, this case has been resolved through litigation. I am writing this article as someone who has been trained as a scientist, as an osteologist, and as a Choctaw Indian. Except where I quote colleagues, I am speaking only for myself, although I am grateful for the conversations I have had with others in both the scientific and Native American communities who have helped me refine my thinking about this case.

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In the case of the Ancient One, I believe that the power of science to name and define has been privileged, and this has resulted in even more skepticism among many Native peoples about the value of archaeology. While I retain some of my faith in the value of archaeology, I feel obligated to explain why some Native people feel so much concern about the Ancient One. It is clear to me that many of the scholars involved do not fully understand (And why would they?) what it means to be Native American and subsequently, do not understand why the tribes involved would believe they have a right to determine the disposition of a 9,000-year-old skeleton from North America. It is instructive to simply reflect on the names used in the case.

If you are a Native person or an Indigenous sympathizer, you might refer to him as the Ancient One. If you aren't, you might call him the Kennewick Man. I'm certain that he has a scientific name; I've heard him referred to as the Richland skeleton, and perhaps the location at which he was found has a scientific name and number as well. It does matter what you call him, because in some ways it indicates how you think of him. The *Bonnichsen* case has resulted in this individual being identified as not Native American within the bounds of the law (NAGPRA), thus transforming his identity from that of a human being to that of a specimen.

To many Native people, a set of human remains may still retain personhood and can still exist or be spoken of as an individual being. A Native person may maintain or reforge a relationship with the individual being represented by those remains and can therefore feel under an obligation to treat that person with respect. The fact that the person lived and died thousands of years ago does not negate the obligation. The Indigenous sense of relationship traverses many borders, some political, some geographic, all crossings facilitated by a perception of shared experience. I am consistently aware of the differences between Natives and non-Natives in how people perceive their relatedness. When I walked in the opening procession for the NMAI, I met a number of Choctaw people, and we instantly slipped into a sense of kinship deep enough to offer invitations of housing for summer gatherings. Two Native people together are enough to form a resistance movement against the wider culture that has sought for so long to pull us apart. Thus, it is easy for me to understand that Native communities feel a tie of kinship to an individual who died and was buried on their lands.

While I have always identified myself as a Native American, I also chose to become a scientist and to participate in this peculiar institution of archaeology. Having acquired the tools of a scientist, I never found that I was able to use them in the same way that some of my colleagues do. My interest in human osteology revolves around a desire to know ancient people better and a willingness to serve as their voice. Yet, I am restrained in my practice by what I had always thought was my basic sense of human compassion, but which has been suggested is my Native sensibility. To put it simply, few Native archaeologists conduct our research at the expense of Native communities. I do not mean to suggest that those who

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wish to study the Kennewick skeleton lack compassion, but I find that they lack an awareness of the impact of their words and actions, and the fighting of this case has further widened the gulf that has long existed.

In a sense, this case has turned on names and definitions. The finding that the Kennewick skeleton is not Native American within the terms of the law points to the ability of the American legal system to define *Native American-ness*, and the legal system itself has long been the province of white males. While I believe that there are people of all identities who may wish to learn from this skeleton, I think that it is a significant fact that the plaintiffs in the Kennewick case are also all white males. This detail points to an emerging approach within archaeology that could prevent future cases of this type. This approach is called Indigenous archaeology, and its practice attempts to place our work squarely within a human context. This practice could as easily be called community-based archaeology, as it gives priority to making certain that our work is relevant and responsible to the affected communities.

From its name alone, Indigenous archaeology might sound like it's the sole province of indigenous peoples, but this is far from the truth. Most of us who practice this approach point to white males such as Larry Zimmerman and Randy McGuire among the early founders as examples.[1] These scholars note that their work with Native communities expanded their understanding of ancient lives. At its heart, Indigenous archaeology presupposes that the inclusion of local communities in the investigation of their past is an obvious, vital part of good archaeology. The communities whose pasts are being studied archaeologically are given a different status from the interested public, for whom many other archaeologists claim to be working, and their relationship to the human beings under investigation is acknowledged and even celebrated.

One of the main arguments in the *Bonnichsen* case has been that study of this skeleton would benefit the public as a whole. However, it has been my experience that the Native American viewpoint is not yet seen as part of this public. While we are indeed making inroads into the realm of archaeology and museums (witness the recent opening of the NMAI), we are still not yet present in significant numbers. What the *Bonnichsen* case has done for American archaeology is to point to the need to incorporate both Native views and Native people into the practice of archaeology. Cherokee lawyer Steven Russell has stated, "We are not anti-science, but if your burials are sacred, so are ours. The story of the earliest peopling of this continent is 'ours' and we demand a voice in its telling."[2] Indigenous archaeology allows for multiple voices to inform our understanding of ancient lives. Although archaeological science is the guiding principle, it is not the only light we shine on the shadows of the past.

Thus, I do not mean to indicate that there is only one story for this continent. In fact, American Indian tribes all have our own narratives about who we are and from whence we came. Often, these traditional histories describe the origins of

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other tribes in ways that do not match their own histories. This is not seen as a reason for conflict, merely as a difference among peoples. In the case of the attempt by archaeologists to understand the peopling of the Americas, archaeologists initially seem to have been saying that there is only one viewpoint and it is the one presented by science. It is clear to those of us who practice Indigenous archaeology that this is not the case, and it is equally clear that Indigenous people also do not hold the single explanation. What is needed is a way of practicing archaeology that does not involve disrespect for American Indian culture.

Anishinabe scholar, Sonya Atalay, describes Indigenous archaeology as a new way of blending what had seemed to be polarized positions, saying: "I advocate for a collaborative approach that blends the strengths of western archaeological science with the knowledge and epistemologies of Indigenous peoples, to create a set of theories and practices for an ethically informed study of the past, history, and heritage."[3] As one of its central tenets, this new approach to archaeology places the rights to cultural heritage within the affected community. Therefore, archaeological practice cannot be divorced from community values. The concept of the general public very definitely includes Native American points of view, not all of which would have the skeleton reburied without study. As Dongoske and others have demonstrated, the passage of NAGPRA has not meant the end of the practice of archaeology.[4] Rather, it has shown to many archaeologists a new, richer way of conducting research.

The human being whose skeleton has been the subject of millions of dollars in legal fees may never have thought of himself as being related to any of the people involved in this case. At this point, we have limited ways of understanding his life, and these are based on biological analysis of his bones. The standard for repatriation is cultural affiliation not biological affiliation. In order to determine his disposition, biological analysis is one method that can be used, but it was never meant to be the single determining factor. Human biology is variable and changes over time as we adjust to our environments. Culture is equally variable, but is difficult to determine from study of an isolated set of remains. Instead, the *Bonnichsen* case reveals much more about us and our current ways of understanding identity. Issues of authority and power also come into play and archaeologists would do well to keep these in mind when going about our work. In the end, what we may be able to learn from the skeleton of this man is all we could learn from any one of ourselves: He was a human being, just like us.

ENDNOTES

1. See Zimmerman, "Made Radical By My Own," and McGuire, "The Sanctity of the Grave."
2. Russell, "Sacred Ground," 3.
3. Atalay, "Indigenous Archaeology."
4. Dongoske et al., "NAGPRA."

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