

Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh

Reconciling American archaeology & Native America

Shortly after William Bradford and his fellow pilgrims arrived on the eastern shores of the New World in the cold autumn of 1620, a small group of men set out to make a “full discovery” of the snow-covered land.¹ After some days of wandering the unknown rivers and hills, they grew hungry. With Providence observing, they thought, the men happened upon a store of corn and grain that Indians had cached underground. The ravenous pilgrims took the food for their own. The next day, Bradford reports that the company wandered into the wilderness deeper still, following the well-beaten trails of the Indians, in the hope that they would find a town; they encountered no one. Eventually the company came to a flat area covered with boards. Curious, the men began to dig.

A layering of grass mats and boards sat just beneath the surface, concealing a few strange bits of bowls, trays, and dishes. Encouraged, they burrowed further and discovered a prize of two bundles. A heavy scent of mildewed earth drifted over them. They unwrapped the first bundle. In their hands they saw a few tools and, as Bradford recalled, “a

great quantitie of fine and perfect red Powder, and in it the bones and skull of a man.” They opened the second bundle. It, too, was packed with the fine red powder, though this time laced with small bones and the skull of a child. The child’s remains had been carefully swathed and decorated with bracelets of pearl-white beads. “We brought sundry of the pretiest things away with vs, and covered the Corps vp againe,” Bradford later wrote. “After this, we digged in sundry like places, but found no more Corne, nor any things els but graues.”

Bradford’s and his fellow pilgrims’ investigations constitute the first known archaeological excavation in North America. Although the discipline would not be fully formed for another two-and-a-half centuries, Bradford’s group unknowingly set the pattern for how Euro-American explorers entered Indian country to satisfy their curiosity, driven by a desire to conquer and control the land, to claim and possess all that made up their new home. Indeed, Bradford and his men put in motion one of the defining narratives of the American self, a self exalted for exploring and exposing American Indian history.

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American Indians weren't just a part of history, though. Settlers soon encountered living Indians who posed an immediate political problem for colonization. Villages and farms, hunting grounds and sacred quarters filled the land Europeans envisioned as their own. Indians, so long as they were alive, could argue and defend against invasion with words and violence. Indians who had passed long ago were another matter; they could not fight their own plundering. The stories of unconcealed resistance – Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Geronimo – now sound America's mythic chords of memory. But the silent taking of graves in the name of nation and science is a collective remembrance that has yet to seep into America's historical consciousness.

The story of archaeology in America is coiled with the colonial experiences of Native Americans. The exploration and exposition of American Indian history has often been a means of defining and narrating the American soul. The alternating image of the savage and noble Indian has provided a mirror for Americans to see themselves. Far from an innocuous pursuit, archaeological explorations have played a role in the drama of Native American efforts to protect their lands and to dictate their own religious beliefs, identities, and histories. The archaeology of Native America is not only about the power to shed light on the past, but also the ability of native peoples to shape their own futures.

Many Native American communities now regularly, and vocally, oppose scientific practices that they believe violate human rights. As a result of such opposition, as well as new laws sympathetic to Indian civil liberties, archaeology has begun a slow metamorphosis, changing from an agent of colonialism to a vehicle of Native American empowerment.

Now, for the first time in the field's history, substantial numbers of Native Americans are pursuing academic degrees in archaeology. Scores of tribes have started their own archaeology and heritage management programs. And many Native Americans regularly collaborate with archaeologists on innovative projects to integrate traditional knowledge with scientific inquiry.

Illuminating the tangled history of archaeology and the social context of its present-day practice reveals no easy answers to America's colonialist inheritance. However, by deeply engaging with this difficult chronicle, we may come to a fuller understanding of why Native Americans are insisting that their voices be heard, and why archaeologists are at last listening to them. The recent paradigm shift in archaeology to more inclusive and collaborative modes is not a quick solution to an entrenched problem so much as an uneven and negotiated process of coming to terms with the skeletons in America's closets. After all, the remains of the man and child that William Bradford took from the Indian crypt nearly four centuries ago will likely never be found, never reburied. Once unearthed, some things are not easily put back where they came from.

Legacies of colonialism in archaeology were finally confronted in the 1970s, when activists began interrupting excavations, protesting the sale of sacred objects, and demanding the return of human remains. But long before the raging demonstrations in front of museums and the heated words traded on editorial pages, there were the quiet moments of taking, when Indian bodies were transformed from human beings in their final repose into specimens for scientific study. The collection of human bodies and funerary

objects explains the anger that fueled the flames of dissent in Indian country and ultimately turned museums into political battlefields.

Consider this example. As a bitterly cold winter receded in early 1871, dozens of Apaches surrendered as prisoners of war to the army soldiers at Camp Grant, outside Tucson, and established the beginnings of a permanent peace.² News of the accord quickly spread throughout southern Arizona, and, as flowers were coming to bloom in the desert, a new hope to the end of war unfolded across the land. Apaches from the Pinal and Aravaipa bands gathered in the shadow of Camp Grant, at a traditional farming site used for generations along the gentle waters of Aravaipa Creek. After three months, the Apaches held a feast to celebrate, for no longer would they be hunted as animals in their own homeland; no longer would their fields of corn and their homes of brush be set aflame by soldiers; no longer would they need to raid in Mexico to feed their families. So the people sang and danced and ate, elation mixed with relief.

The feast dwindled and night fell over the sleeping village. Then, suddenly, in the stillness of the early morning, a hail of bullets tore into the encampment, killing not just the dream of peace, but scores of Apache men, women, and children. Behind the guns was a vigilante group of Tucson men who believed that all Apaches should be killed for the crimes of a few – for the violent raiding that unrelated Chiricahua Apache bands continued throughout the first months of 1871. After emptying their guns, the Tucsonans walked through the village, stripping several girls naked and raping them, hacking bodies apart, and capturing nearly thirty children as slaves. In less than an hour, the attackers had com-

pleted their gruesome labor of murdering more than one hundred Apaches. After breakfast they returned back to a jubilant Tucson.

The next day the surviving Apaches returned to the ruined village, expressing their grief “too wild and terrible to be described,” as one witness wrote. A mass grave was dug and the bodies placed within it. But for at least one victim this makeshift sepulcher would not be her final resting place. Close to a year after the massacre, a surgeon with archaeological ambitions visited the site. Dr. Valery Havard proceeded to unearth the burials and stole the head of a young Apache woman, mailing it to the Army Medical Museum in Washington, D.C. In 1900, the skull was transferred to the Smithsonian Institution, “America’s attic,” for the purpose of scientific study and exhibition; it has remained there for more than a century.

A small but significant portion of the bodies that ended up at places like the Smithsonian came from grisly nineteenth-century massacre and battlefield sites, including those infamous slaughters at Camp Grant, Sand Creek, Wazita, and Wounded Knee. Many skulls, scalps, and personal effects served as war booty for American soldiers and pioneer settlers, but others were gathered with the express intent to serve science. In 1862, the Army Medical Museum was founded, and Union medical officers in the field were ordered to collect “specimens of morbid anatomy . . . together with projectiles and foreign bodies removed.”³ Initially the main objects of study were those soldiers that perished in the Civil War. With Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, the museum began looking west, focusing on the fresh bounty of the Indian wars. Thousands of bodies and funerary objects were amassed over the de-

cares, part of a larger national project to gather up the bodies of Indians in the name of scientific progress.

The Army Medical Museum was particularly interested in documenting the effects of war on the human body, but American Indian remains also provided a means to illustrate ideas about human biology prevailing at the time. Samuel G. Morton published in 1839 his seminal *Crania Americana*, which employed a scientific framework that implicitly proved the inferiority of various races, including Indians. Not only did Morton's book legitimize the despoliation of Indian lifeways and lands, but it also inspired generations of Americans to plunder Indian sites. With the rise of craniology came the demand for craniums to study: soldiers, Indian agents, traders, settlers, and others were enlisted to gather Indian bodies from both ancient and recent graves. Nineteenth-century anthropology museums, with their self-appointed mission to understand and document human evolution, soon became vast repositories of Indian skeletons.

Some Indian bodies were taken directly from graves, often in stealth. At times anthropologists expressed conflicted feelings about their excavations, but felt science demanded it of them. As the "father" of American anthropology, Franz Boas, once wrote, "It is most unpleasant work to steal bones from a grave, but what is the use, someone has to do it."⁴ Such acquiescent sentiments reflected a broader viewpoint in America that Indian bodies, like their lands and resources, were for the taking. As recently as 1965, a U.S. court ruled in favor of a man that had removed the skull from a grave of a Seminole Indian who had died just two years earlier, because unmarked Seminole burial places then did not meet the legal definition of "cemeteries." Several years later, in

Iowa, twenty-seven human bodies were discovered during a road construction project. While twenty-six of the bodies were identified by headstones, one had none and was accompanied by glass beads and brass rings. The twenty-six bodies, presumed to be Anglo-Americans, were immediately reburied in the Glenwood Cemetery, while the one body, presumed to be Indian, was taken to a museum.

The idea that Indian bodies could serve science and the nation was codified in laws, which uniquely empowered archaeologists to collect and study Indian remains. The 1906 Antiquities Act, for instance, required researchers, among other things, to have a permit to conduct excavations on federal land. The permit could only be obtained with academic credentials and proof "that the examinations, excavations, and gatherings are undertaken for the benefit of reputable museums . . . with a view to increasing the knowledge of such objects, and that the gatherings shall be made for permanent preservation in public museums."⁵ Such laws divorced Native Americans from their own heritage while privileging academic researchers who were to preserve Indian history and culture for all Americans.

By far, most American archaeologists over the twentieth century were not nefarious, but rather were following the laws of the land and long-standing Western intellectual traditions. They had a genuine interest in Indian cultures and history, and their studies laid the groundwork for a national heritage that honored America's first inhabitants. Indeed, archaeologists have been building on the excavations of, for example, Thomas Jefferson, who dug and studied Monticello's ruins, in a genuine effort to know the country's deepest human origins. They have been following in the

footsteps of Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis, who in the 1840s used systematic archaeological methods to determine that the “mound builders” of the American heartland were ancient Indians rather than ancient Greeks, Chinese, or lost Israelites. Archaeologists trail the work of the Bureau of American Ethnology, which in the late 1800s preserved a multitude of objects and studied scores of sites, particularly in the American West, just as Native American communities were reaching their depths of despair and waves of migrants were flooding into America’s last open lands.

Millions today visit national parks across the United States – Mesa Verde National Park, Hopewell Culture National Park, Washita Battlefield National Park – built from archaeological studies and preserved because of archaeological advocacy. These sites are the foundation of America’s proud national patrimony. Today, when a federal project is developed, such as a new dam to provide electricity or a new highway alignment to make a road safer, it is archaeologists who first survey the area. Often with water nearly lapping at their feet or bulldozers roaring behind them, archaeologists excavate sites that would otherwise be obliterated, preserving native histories that would otherwise be lost to time. The scientists often remove and study American Indian human remains in the path of such destruction.

Despite their political disadvantage over much of the last two centuries in the United States, Native Americans have long resisted the theft and appropriation of their ancestors’ bodies and belongings. In one of the earliest documented examples, in 1883, Apaches demanded the return of looted heritage objects several cavalrymen had taken from a cave in central Arizona. In 1902,

archaeologists from the American Museum of Natural History excavated a burial ground on Long Island and were told by the local Shinnecock Indians that the scholars “would lose the friendship of the tribe if [they] dug up any more bodies.”⁶

Protests of these kinds were haphazard, variously successful; it wasn’t until the pan-Indian movement gained momentum in the early 1970s that museums, archaeologists, and the public began to take Indian objections seriously. In the summer of 1971, members of AIM, the American Indian Movement, vandalized an archaeological excavation in Minnesota. More protests followed in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, resulting in some of the first repatriations of human remains. Museums began removing Indian bodies from public display. After the controversial twenty-seven bodies were discovered in Iowa, the Iowa State Historical Society was picketed until, by order of the governor, the lone Indian body was also reburied, alongside the Anglo-American remains.

By the mid-1980s, the call for returning and reburying indigenous bodies had spread around the world. “Our heritage – your playground,” poignantly phrased by one Australian Aboriginal leader, captured the mood of many in native communities across Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.⁷ Many archaeologists and museum professionals acknowledged the claims of native communities, but were concerned about how to return objects fairly and transparently to tribes. Other museum curators and directors were conflicted about how repatriation might contradict their duties to care for objects in the public trust. Still others flatly dismissed the protests as political ploys. Large swaths of the public, however,

sympathized with archaeology's critics, and so, too, did America's politicians.

On November 16, 1990, Congress passed NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which requires museums to return human remains and particular kinds of sacred and communal objects to Native American tribes.⁸ At the time, some observers estimated that anthropology museums in the United States alone held the remains of more than two hundred thousand Native American men, women, and children. The mood in museums and anthropology departments across the country was dark for the first few years after NAGPRA took effect. Detractors predicted that museums would become empty shells – like vast libraries with no books – and that the legislation signaled the death knell for physical anthropology. Yet with time museum professionals began to acknowledge that their worst fears were misplaced. The law required museums to compile inventories of their collections. Some museums created a complete list of their holdings for the first time. The law required museums to determine “cultural affiliations,” the relationship between past Native American groups and present-day tribes. Physical anthropologists suddenly had more work, rather than less, often conducting research on human remains in collections that had for years sat unnoticed and untouched. The law required museums to consult with tribal political and religious leaders. For the first time many museums began an open dialogue with American Indians, learning that they shared common concerns and interests.

Controversies still emerged, most notably in 1996 after a nine-thousand-year-old skeleton was accidentally discovered near Kennewick, Washington.⁹ A con-

sortium of tribes wanted the body returned and reburied, while a small group of archaeologists sued to study the remains. The battle was waged in federal courtrooms for nearly a decade, and in the court of public opinion the rhetoric dwelt on issues of academic freedom, religion versus science, and the rights of the dead. Over the last year, the University of California at Berkeley's Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology was swept up in similar debates when administrators sought to eliminate the museum's NAGPRA Unit, though reportedly some twelve thousand Indian bodies still sit on storage shelves at the museum. What doesn't make front-page news is the daily burden and obligation – for tribes and museums alike – of repatriation, a complex negotiation of law, ethics, politics, and economics. Tribes are overwhelmed by inventories listing objects and remains in the hundreds, sometimes thousands that must be sifted through and responded to expeditiously while honoring traditional beliefs. Museums continue to struggle balancing their legal duties with their ethical responsibilities as stewards of a public trust: to preserve, celebrate, and honor America's material past.¹⁰

The repatriation crusade that began in earnest in the 1970s and continues today is arguably among the most important human rights campaigns in American history, equal to the search for African American civil rights and equality for women, for it established that Native Americans have the same rights as all Americans, in life and in death. Repatriation legislation is also important to archaeology's history and future, shifting the relationship between Native Americans and archaeologists and altering the flow of objects and remains away from

museums and back to source communities.

Some have described this process as “mending the circle” of American Indian history and culture, a circle broken apart in the wake of colonialism, outright war, stolen lands, forced schooling, and imposed religion.¹¹ Like native-language programs, a return to traditional farming and foods, and reclaiming sacred sites, repatriation is a means for Native Americans to salvage their past while moving forward into the future. Repatriation is a kind of restorative justice; it is focused on the healing of breaches instead of the logic of eye-for-eye retribution. Still, repatriation raises important questions about “who owns the past,” about academic freedom and religious rights, that are far from settled.¹²

A year before NAGPRA was passed, Congress put into law the National Museum of the American Indian Act, which not only guided repatriation for the Smithsonian Institution, but also established a museum to honor Native American culture. In 2004, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) opened its doors, with pride of place at the foot of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. The express goal of the museum is to work in collaboration with native peoples throughout the western hemisphere to protect culture by sustaining worldviews, cultivating artistic expression, and empowering indigenous voices. From its architecture to its cafeteria and exhibits, the NMAI reflects native perspectives and values while bringing wide and critical attention to the history and living traditions of the Americas’ first nations.

Praise for the NMAI has been abundant, though criticism has been plentiful, too. At the heart of many of these debates is an unsettled argument about

whether culture should be presented in essentialist or relativist terms. Should objects be exhibited objectively (by outside scholars) and hierarchically, representing timeless aesthetic values – or should objects be presented subjectively (by the communities themselves) and democratically, by which the values of things are considered transitory and contingent?¹³ In contrast to museums such as France’s new Musée du Quai Branly, which features exhibits and art of indigenous peoples of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas from the perspective of entrenched Western notions of universal values, the NMAI makes an unambiguous commitment to the relativist presentation and interpretation of objects.

Whether deemed successful or not, the NMAI clearly presents the profound transitions of museum anthropology and archaeology over the last several decades. In particular, the NMAI’s collaborative partnerships with indigenous communities – in which “community curators” design exhibits and collection storage areas – and the museum’s many community-based outreach programs represent a radical departure from long-held attitudes. Not musty storehouses of dead and dying cultures, museums like the NMAI project an image of indigenous peoples as vibrant. Although the NMAI has borrowed strategies from other institutions, such as the Arizona State Museum’s soulful 1992 “Paths of Life” exhibit, the country’s new national museum, from its size to its unwavering commitment to inclusion, signifies a real and meaningful change in the public presentation of American Indians.

Ironically, many Native American tribes have transformed the traditional tools of colonialism, archaeological science and museums, and now use them

for their own ends. More than two hundred tribes across the United States have their own museums and cultural centers. Many of these are tied to casinos, such as the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, which has a massive exhibit hall, two libraries, and live performances of contemporary art and culture. However, other museums run without casino revenue, such as the Pueblo of Zuni's A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center in western New Mexico; it has a humble exhibit space and is explicitly geared toward serving the Zuni community. In the 1970s, a handful of tribes began conducting their own research by developing cultural resource management programs, and now several dozen have active programs. Tribes have been further empowered by the 1992 amendments to the National Historic Preservation Act, which established Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPO) that parallel state-level preservation efforts. Today, more than sixty-five tribes have gone through the rigorous process of establishing their own THPOs.

Non-native archaeologists have also begun increasingly to work closely with native communities throughout the research process.¹⁴ The San Pedro Ethnohistory Project is one recent example of a collaborative project, conducted in partnership with four Arizona Native American tribes: Hopi, San Carlos Apache, Tohono O'odham, and Zuni.¹⁵ Archaeologists have detailed the Pedro Valley's twelve thousand years of human occupation, but never before had researchers systematically sought to document the traditional histories of the region's native communities. Over the course of three years, this collaboration resulted in a better understanding of how descendant communities conceive of their ancestors, the cultural val-

ues of place, and the historical narratives embedded in tribal traditions. Projects of this kind also put more scientifically-based archaeologists in close contact with tribes. Wesley Bernardini, for example, has used Hopi clan narratives of ancient migrations to create hypotheses, which can then be tested against archaeological data. "At multiple points in the research, traditional knowledge raised novel possibilities that turned out to have empirical support once we knew where, and how, to look," Bernardini concluded. "Incorporating Native American knowledge into archaeological research is not only a way to establish a meaningful dialogue with an important constituency, but a way to improve our collective understanding of the past."¹⁶

Only recently have Native Americans begun to see archaeology as a practicable occupation. Arthur C. Parker, of Seneca descent, was the first Native American to become a professional archaeologist, starting his career in 1900 under the tutelage of Harvard University's Frederic W. Putnam. While Parker was successful as an individual – becoming a noted museum director, the first president of the Society for American Archaeology, and a member of the National Academy of Sciences – it was decades before native people began following in his footsteps.¹⁷ Today, out of several thousand, only fifteen archaeologists who claim Native American heritage as their primary identity hold a PhD.¹⁸

To make intellectual space for native participation, the concept of "indigenous archaeology" has emerged as a fresh paradigm, encompassing any form of archaeology conducted in collaboration with native communities and that challenges the historical political economy of the discipline.¹⁹ Some have argued that indigenous archaeology is not

intellectually viable because it depends upon fallacies of race by perpetuating a stereotype of Indians as somehow metaphysically different (caught in cyclical thinking, innately connected to the land) from non-Indians.²⁰ However, the special rights of indigenous communities to archaeology need not be founded on essentialist imaginings. The legacies of colonialism, socio-political context of scientific inquiry, and insights of traditional knowledge provide a strong foundation for community-based archaeology projects by, for, and with indigenous peoples.

Despite such promising trends, the tension between archaeologists and Native Americans is often strained. NAGPRA and the public archaeology movement have encouraged archaeologists to begin meaningful dialogues with native communities, but conversations on heated topics cannot always end in amity and goodwill. Professional archaeologists today are not the progenitors of injustice, but they are nonetheless its inheritors. More than 32,000 Indian human remains have been repatriated, but another 118,000 bodies continue to sit on museum shelves across the United States, as “culturally identifiable” remains, unclear to whom, or if, they should be returned. Incalculable numbers of Indian body parts and sacred objects are stored in museums outside the United States, as there is no law to guide their repatriation. Even when objects are returned, sometimes their sudden arrival can reignite old animosities and rivalries within a native community. Museum exhibits and books continue to be produced without native input, presenting Native Americans as the timeless noble or savage other. Native Americans continue to represent a fraction of the archaeological profession, despite the fact that most ar-

chaeology in the United States focuses on Native American history. Native Americans continue to have their sovereignty undermined, struggling to protect their sacred places and cherished cultural landscapes from looters and developers. Much progress has been made toward the reconciliation between American archaeology and Native America, but there is still much work to be done.

In recognition of the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s 150th anniversary in 1998, Bruno Latour, in the journal *Science*, wrote about the difference between science and research:

Science is certainty; Research is uncertainty. Science is supposed to be cold, straight and detached; Research is warm, involving and risky. Science puts an end to the vagaries of human disputes; Research fuels controversies by more controversies. Science produces objectivity by escaping as much as possible from the shackles of ideology, passions and emotions; Research feeds on all of those as so many handles to render familiar new objects of enquiry.

He distinguishes science as an ideal, an abstract goal of uncorrupted objectivity, and research as the messy reality of our projects. As archaeologists have come to recognize the multifaceted social context and historical contingencies of their discipline, many have come to see their work as a craft, a dynamic process of creation. In the previous model, society was divorced from science; in the research model society is inseparable. “One cliché says it all,” Latour explains, “in one palace, Galileo deals with the fate of falling bodies while, in another palace, princes, cardinals and philosophers deal with the fate of human souls.”²¹

Nearly since the founding of modern archaeology, its practitioners have debated whether the discipline is art or science, in search of a common humanity or in search of universal laws. At different points in the profession's history, certain sides of this debate have held rein. In the 1970s, "processual archaeology" drew the field to the natural sciences; in the 1980s, "post-processual archaeology" swayed scholars to the humanities. Today, many archaeologists work from both traditions, though it is unclear if the field has profitably synthesized these different ways of knowing the past, or if the field suffers from acute schizophrenia.

The history of the relationship between Native Americans and American archaeologists makes plain that the field cannot return to a time of innocence, or view itself as detached from society and politics. This realization, however, does not mean that research with the goals and methods of science cannot proceed. Indigenous

archaeology – as well as its cousins feminist, collaborative, and community-based archaeologies – provides an epochal path through the wilderness of the discipline's future, a blending of the arts and sciences that will create more just and accurate understandings of the past and the nature of our material world.

In the United States, this change in perspective allows us to move beyond the stereotypes of Indians, so long a source of spectacle in the American imagination. One only has to think of James Fenimore Cooper's last Mohican or the University of Illinois's mascot Chief Illiniwek to trace this troubling legacy. The collection, study, and display of Indians further objectified Indians, transforming them into things of morbid curiosity and scientific inquiry. It is time to move on. Archaeologists must no longer see Indians as mere objects of study; they must no longer see Indians without seeing their humanity.

ENDNOTES

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