

# Taking the Skeletons out of the Closet



## Contested Authority and Human Remains Displays in the Anthropology Museum

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### Introduction

Museums exhibit what society deems worth seeing and worth preserving at a specific period in time. They reflect societal biases, political influences, and shifting cultural authority. A museum's authority is especially important when it displays human remains.<sup>1</sup> These displays in anthropological collections pose contentious issues around who can claim ownership of bodies and who writes the narratives about those bodies. Claimants in this debate include descendants of displayed individuals, scientists who generate knowledge on behalf of humanity, museums as stewards of cultural heritage, owners of land or nation-states in which these bodies were found, and lawmakers with the authority to broker compromise between claimants. Past narratives have upheld colonial, pseudoscientific, and scientific ideas; only in the last sixty years have indigenous ideas and repatriation claims written by indigenous people entered the narrative.

1. *Human remains* are the bodies of deceased individuals, regardless of the state of decomposition of those bodies.

Zeresenay Alemseged holds the 3.3 million-year-old remains of an *A. afarensis* infant.

The history of displaying human remains is long, multifaceted, and often contentious, particularly in anthropology. While many groups, from the Chinchorro people of South America to medieval Christians, displayed the bodies of their dead as religious iconography, the secular practice of bodily display gained momentum in Western science from the late nineteenth century to the present.<sup>2</sup> In Europe, and later North America, professional and amateur collectors amassed human remains from around the world, which were increasingly organized in museums.<sup>3</sup> The display of the human body in anthropology collections was integral to the construction and promotion of ideas about race, ancestry, and human prehistory, and although these displays have shifted in response to ethical, political, cultural, and historical debates in the twentieth century, fascination with human remains continues to draw visitors to museums.<sup>4</sup>

The Field Museum of Natural History is an illuminating case study in the history of human-remains display due to its centrality as an institution in Chicago's cultural formation, its cultural status as a state-of-the-art museum, and its ambitions to global scholarship. Historians of American cultural patronage in the Gilded Age highlight how civic leaders, like Marshall Field, promoted stewardship as well as social control through Chicago institutions in a more explicit manner than

2. Samuel Redman, "Reconsidering *Body Worlds*: Why Do We Still Flock to Exhibits of Dead Human Beings?" Conversation, Apr. 8, 2016, [theconversation.com/reconsidering-body-worlds-why-do-we-still-flock-to-exhibits-of-dead-human-beings-57024](http://theconversation.com/reconsidering-body-worlds-why-do-we-still-flock-to-exhibits-of-dead-human-beings-57024).

3. Frank Howarth, "Trends and Influences on Museum Anthropology and the Study of Indigenous Peoples," ICOM, Aug. 6, 2018, [icom.museum/en/news/trends-and-influences-on-museum-anthropology-and-the-study-of-indigenous-peoples](http://icom.museum/en/news/trends-and-influences-on-museum-anthropology-and-the-study-of-indigenous-peoples); Samuel J. Redman, *Bone Rooms: From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

4. Samuel Redman, video conference with the author, Jan. 8, 2020; Redman, "Reconsidering *Body Worlds*," Conversation.

did social elites in cities like Boston or New York.<sup>5</sup> Smaller museums that display human remains, such as the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard or the Penn Museum in Philadelphia, may have a more specific anthropological focus, yet they lack the scope and public recognition of the Field Museum.<sup>6</sup> The Smithsonian Institution, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and the British Museum may reach a greater number of visitors with grander national aims, but the Field Museum, like other large natural history museums, established its objective to spread the "lattice of . . . research, collections, and anthropological scholarship across space and through time to the far corners of the planet," according to a centennial curatorial anthology on the museum's past and future.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, it "has been deeply intertwined with the history of Chicago."<sup>8</sup> Through interviews with various claimants, this thesis traces anthropological displays of the human body at the Field Museum of Natural History, starting from the World's Fair of 1893 to repatriations in the twentieth century and current exhibits.

The anthropologist Franz Boas and the showman P. T. Barnum both conceived of separate anthropological spectacles of bodies and human

5. Clarke A. Chambers, review of *Noblesse Oblige: Charity and Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago, 1849–1929*, by Kathleen D. McCarthy, *American Historical Review* 88, no. 2 (Apr. 1983): 483–84, [doi.org/10.1086/ahr/88.2.483](https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/88.2.483).

6. "Highlights of the Collection," Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, accessed Apr. 10, 2020, [www.peabody.harvard.edu/node/473](http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/node/473).

7. "The Most Visited Museums in the World," Museums.EU, accessed Apr. 10, 2020, [museums.eu/highlight/details/105664](http://museums.eu/highlight/details/105664); John W. McCarter, Chambers, forward to "Curators, Collections, and Contexts: Anthropology at the Field Museum, 1893–2002," ed. Stephen E. Nash and Gary M. Feinman, special issue, *Fieldiana*, no. 36 (Sept. 2003): 1, [www.jstor.org/stable/29782663](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29782663).

8. Ibid.

specimens at the 1893 World's Fair.<sup>9</sup> In the years leading up to the fair, Frederic Ward Putnam, a curator at the Peabody Museum at Harvard, worked with Boas to amass objects and bodies (up to one hundred collections for display), which was one of the most significant cultural events in the development of American anthropology museums.<sup>10</sup> As well, "commercial enterprises combined with fair organizers in attempts to bring indigenous people to the fair as living exhibits" on the Midway fairgrounds outside the fair's main exhibition buildings, where they reconstructed traditional villages, wore traditional dress, and were sometimes accompanied by human skeletal remains and mummies.<sup>11</sup> The exhibits introduced an unprecedented number of the public to the emerging fields of physical anthropology and archaeology.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, these displays of both living and deceased bodies portrayed indigenous people as "savage and primitive natives," which reinforced nineteenth-century racial hierarchies as a scientifically "classifiable and seemingly static lens for fairgoers to interpret humanity."<sup>13</sup>

Following the fair, the state of Illinois chartered a new natural history museum, the Columbian Museum of Chicago, to house the fair's artifacts, and local business magnate Marshall Fields donated \$1 million

9. "P. T. Barnum's 'What the Fair Should Be,'" *World's Fair Chicago 1893*, Dec. 31, 2017, [worldsfairchicago1893.com/2017/12/31/p-t-barnums-what-the-fair-should-be](http://worldsfairchicago1893.com/2017/12/31/p-t-barnums-what-the-fair-should-be); Susan Hegeman, "Franz Boas and Professional Anthropology: On Mapping the Borders of the 'Modern,'" *Victorian Studies* 41, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 455–83, [www.jstor.org/stable/3829344](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3829344).

10. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 44–45.

11. *Ibid.*

12. At the height of the fair, attendance reached 713,646, which was "peerless in history." Many of these visitors would have also visited the ethnographic villages on the Midway. "Record Columbian Expo Attendance Previous Day," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 10, 1893.

13. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 45.

towards the endeavor, which was renamed the Field Columbian Museum in his honor.<sup>14</sup> The *Chicago Times* lauded the new museum's opening on June 2, 1894, for being "like a memory of the fair."<sup>15</sup> Franz Boas, "America's most influential anthropologist," was again the curator of the anthropology collection.<sup>16</sup> The museum's collection continued to grow, surpassing the available space in the fair's original home in the Palace of Fine Art, and the museum moved in 1921 to its current location in Grant Park.<sup>17</sup> Today, the museum's anthropology department holds over 1.5 million artifacts and employs more than 150 researchers who conduct research expeditions worldwide, conveying their findings through publications, exhibitions, and public programs.<sup>18</sup> Surpassed only by the Smithsonian and possibly the American Museum of Natural History in

14. "Field Museum History," Field Museum, accessed Feb. 25, 2020, [www.field-museum.org/about/history](http://www.field-museum.org/about/history). The museum became the Field Museum of Natural History in 1905, the Chicago Natural History Museum in 1943, and reverted to the Field Museum of Natural History in 1966. See Ed Yastrow and Stephen E. Nash, "Henry Field, Collections, and Exhibit Development, 1926–1941," in "Curators, Collections, and Contexts: Anthropology at the Field Museum, 1893–2002," ed. Stephen E. Nash and Gary M. Feinman, special issue, *Fieldiana*, no. 36 (Sept. 2003): 127–38, [www.jstor.org/stable/29782675](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29782675).

15. Cited in Steven Conn, "Field Museum," in *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*, ed. James R. Grossman, Ann Durkin Keating, and Janice L. Reiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 292–93, [www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/450.html](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/450.html).

16. "The new museum divided natural history into four categories: botany, zoology, geology, and anthropology. This last category represented a new science, and it constituted some of the most extensive and attention-grabbing displays." *Ibid.*

17. The Palace of Fine Arts now houses the Museum of Science and Industry. *Ibid.*

18. "Research & Collections," Field Museum, accessed Feb. 25, 2020, [www.fieldmuseum.org/science/research](http://www.fieldmuseum.org/science/research).

New York in “size, influence, and prestige,” the Field Museum is an important producer of narratives about museum anthropology for professionals and the public.<sup>19</sup>

The Field Museum has long been a site of contestation and conversation about the historical and scientific narratives that underpin displays of human remains. As demonstrated by its centennial publication, the museum has recently begun to reflect on its place in anthropological study, in response to these debates and to the shifting role of the museum in society.<sup>20</sup> For these reasons, the Field Museum is an excellent location to examine perspectives of different stakeholders in human-remains display, such as curators, repatriation specialists, exhibitions managers, indigenous activists, and the viewing public. I interviewed nine subjects with current or past connections with the Field Museum or connected to human-remains repatriation or research (see Appendix). I also integrate perspectives from historical and modern newspapers, congressional testimony, legal documents, sociological commentators, and metanarratives produced by the Field Museum. Sources not related directly to the Field Museum contextualize and situate the museum within the global history of human-remains display or present narratives and perspectives surrounding debates that affect the museum.<sup>21</sup>

19. Conn, “Field Museum.”

20. Stephen E. Nash and Gary M. Feinman, “Introduction: A Glorious Foundation: 109 Years of Anthropology at the Field Museum of Natural History,” in “Curators, Collections, and Contexts: Anthropology at the Field Museum, 1893–2002,” ed. Stephen E. Nash and Gary M. Feinman, special issue, *Fieldiana*, no. 36 (Sept. 2003): 7, [www.jstor.org/stable/29782664](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29782664).

21. Field Museum archival documents related to exhibits of human remains are not inventoried and would take “several years” to review, according to the archivist. Documents related to ethnographic exhibits at the 1893 World’s Fair are either located in other institutions or did not survive the 1920 move from the museum’s previous location at the Palace of Fine Arts to its current location in Grant Park. Thus, the research presented here is far from exhaustive;

The first section on transcultural ethics demonstrates that no single story links bodies within museums. It discusses how colonial ideas shaped museum science and the repatriation debates that have arisen in response to this history. The challenges posed by these practices have resulted in growing societal unease over displays of human remains with some parties believing that such displays are unethical under any circumstances.<sup>22</sup> The section concludes by examining objections to the violation of individual consent and claims by indigenous groups to repatriate the bodies of their descendants.<sup>23</sup>

The second section on museums and spectacle considers tensions between entertainment and education that recur throughout the history of human-remains display. These tensions occurred first in public dissections in anatomy schools, cabinets of curiosity, freak shows, and displays of human remains for profit. This tension continued within anthropology museums, which seek to balance scientific research with the growing need to attract visitors and funding.

The third and final section on museum narratives and authority questions the role that museums play: Who controls the narratives within the museum? Who owns the dead? Indeed, these ambiguities have led to a “crisis of cultural authority” among scientific institutions, indigenous groups, and governing bodies worldwide.<sup>24</sup> I first analyze the evolution of narratives within the ranks of museum professionals by considering dioramas, sculptures, and other forms of “paleoart” exhibitions at the

there is much more to investigate surrounding the history of human remains at museums such as the Field. I conducted research in Internet archives and in the Biodiversity Heritage Library.

22. Jodi Simkin, telephone interview with the author, Jan. 13, 2020.

23. *Repatriation* in this context is the process of returning a body to its “owners,” such as from a museum to the body’s closest living cultural affiliations.

24. Tiffany Jenkins, *Contesting Human Remains in Museum Collections: The Crisis of Cultural Authority* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2011), 6.



Field Museum. I conclude with the twenty-year legal debate surrounding the Kennewick Man to analyze controversies over legal ownership, human identity, and scientific narrative.

## Transcultural Ethics in Scientific Displays of Human Remains

Many natural history museums include anthropology departments with large collections of human remains, but the displays of selective human remains may be a minor part of institutions devoted to the collection, study, and display of the natural world.<sup>25</sup> Increasingly, activists and museumgoers have begun to express concern over the ethics of these displays. Jodi Simkin, director of cultural affairs and heritage for the Klahoose First Nation, believes that under no circumstances should the body of a deceased human be displayed without the individual's consent.<sup>26</sup> Simkin, a repatriation activist, speaks regularly at conferences and professional events against the practice of collecting human remains, which she considers an ethical violation, and she supports indigenous groups seeking to repatriate the remains of their ancestors from museums. This perspective resonates with some museumgoers. A 2014 study of visitor perceptions of human-remains exhibits at the Museo de las Momias in Guanajuato, Mexico, the Milwaukee Public Museum, and the traveling *Body Worlds* exhibits reveals that many were fascinated by these displays yet troubled by the ethics behind them.<sup>27</sup> Viewers cite

25. Joshua J. Tewksbury et al., "Natural History's Place in Science and Society," *Bio-Science* 64, no. 4 (Apr. 2014): 300–310, doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biu032.

26. In this circumstance, *consent* means that a person agrees voluntarily to have their body on public display, was informed about the nature of the display, and understood the implications of the display. Jodi Simkin, telephone interview with author, Jan. 13, 2020.

27. Amanda Balistreri, "Putting the Dead on Display: An Exploration of Visitor Perceptions and Motivations Regarding Preserved Human Remains in Museums

concerns about depriving the deceased of a proper burial, disbelief that informed consent was obtained, and taboos against exhibits seen as "ghoulish," "bizarre," "inappropriate for children," and "voyeuristic."<sup>28</sup>

Despite these recent concerns, ethical objections and taboos surrounding human-remains display have been culturally discontinuous throughout history. Numerous groups displayed human remains for spiritual, religious, scientific, or entertainment purposes long before the Nuremberg Code of 1947 introduced a new ethical standard.<sup>29</sup> Some of the fascination with human remains stems from their connection with mortality: interacting with the dead in many cultures is an opportunity to reflect on selfhood, community, and lineages of ancestors.<sup>30</sup> The Chinchorro people of what is now northern Chile mummified and transported their dead during nomadic journeys (6000–2000 BCE); scholars think the mummies were central to the social lives of the Chinchorro as a means of communication with ancestors.<sup>31</sup> From the Inca period through the colonial era (c. 1400–1821), Andean people displayed and visited mummified remains of ancestors for spiritual reasons.<sup>32</sup> In medieval Europe the relics of saints or religious figures were displayed in monasteries, cathedrals, ossuaries, and

with Particular Emphasis on the Museo de las Momias de Guanajuato and *Body Worlds & the Cycle of Life*" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014).

28. *Ibid.*, 86, 92, 101, 112, 168, 123.

29. Joel Sparks, "Timeline of Laws Related to the Protection of Human Subjects," Office of NIH History & Stetten Museum, National Institutes of Health, June 2002, history.nih.gov/about/timelines\_laws\_human.html.

30. Barra O'Donnabhain and María Cecilia Lozada, eds., *Archaeological Human Remains: Global Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2014), 1.

31. Konrad Spindler et al., eds., *Human Mummies: A Global Survey of Their Status and the Techniques of Conservation* (Vienna: Springer, 2013), 136.

32. *Ibid.*, 136.

other religious contexts, acting as a “special locus of access to the divine.”<sup>33</sup> On the other end of the spectrum of display, nineteenth-century circus sideshows in the United States displayed bodies of people with congenital abnormalities, known as “freaks,” for public entertainment.<sup>34</sup> Although the freak show is no longer widespread, the public’s fascination with anatomical specimens continues, as demonstrated by the popularity of the *Body Worlds* exhibitions, which have displayed dissected, “plastinated” human remains to over fifty million visitors worldwide since 1995.<sup>35</sup>

The ethical ground of displaying human bodies in museums for scientific purposes remains unstable. Each display is part of a larger network of historical contingencies and brings the belief systems of diverse groups under scrutiny. Analysis and public display of human remains have been instrumental in establishing the Western scientific tradition, first in anatomy, medicine, and public education.<sup>36</sup> Early anatomy museums, such as the Museum of Human Anatomy of the University of Bologna, established circa 1288 CE, were more likely to display wax models than cadavers due to the difficulty of preservation.<sup>37</sup> Mondino de Liuzzi performed the first public anatomical dissection of a human corpse in 1315

33. Caroline Walker Bynum and Paula Gerson, “Body-Part Reliquaries and Body Parts in the Middle Ages,” *Gesta* 36, no. 1 (1997): 4, doi.org/10.2307/767274.

34. Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 129.

35. “Philosophy,” *Body Worlds*, accessed Jan. 7, 2020, bodyworlds.com/about/philosophy; “Plastination Technique,” *Body Worlds*, accessed Jan. 7, 2020, bodyworlds.com/plastination/plastination-technique.

36. O’Donnabhain and Lozada, 12.

37. Venkatesh Vishwanath Kamath, Biswabeesa Ray, Shakuntala R. Pai, and Ramakrishna Avadhani, “The Origin of Anatomy Museums,” *European Journal of Anatomy* 18, no. 2 (2014): 64, eurjanat.com/v1/journal/paper.php?id=130361vk.

in Bologna for the education of medical students.<sup>38</sup> These dissections spread to medical schools throughout Europe and soon attracted artists interested in the human figure and members of the general public drawn to the spectacle.<sup>39</sup> In the sixteenth century, anatomy theaters accommodated increasingly larger crowds.<sup>40</sup> Later anatomical museums, such as the Mütter Museum at the College of Physicians in Philadelphia, displayed a greater variety of preserved human remains.<sup>41</sup> These institutions were established for medical education, but also integrated a voyeuristic aspect by displaying bodies with rare medical conditions in a manner similar to the “freak show.”<sup>42</sup>

The anthropology museum began to play an increasingly major role in scientific research in the sixteenth century.<sup>43</sup> Some amateur collectors and enthusiasts accumulated bones haphazardly and opportunistically.<sup>44</sup> Other wealthy collectors amassed private “cabinets of curiosities,” small-scale displays of human remains, artifacts, and natural materials to “tell stories about the wonders and oddities of the natural world” and

38. Sanjib Kumar Ghosh, “Human Cadaveric Dissection: A Historical Account from Ancient Greece to the Modern Era,” *Anatomy and Cell Biology* 48, no. 3 (Sept. 2015): 156, doi.org/10.5115/acb.2015.48.3.153.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. “Collections,” Mütter Museum, accessed Jan. 12, 2020, muttermuseum.org/collections.

42. Adams, 135.

43. Anita Herle, “Anthropology Museums and Museum Anthropology,” *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Oct. 6, 2016, www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/anthropology-museums-and-museum-anthropology.

44. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 19.

the human's place in it.<sup>45</sup> By the late sixteenth century, some “cabinets” came to occupy entire buildings.<sup>46</sup> The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology at Oxford was likely the first “cabinet of curiosities” to become a museum. In 1683 it was a “building used for the presentation and illustration of objects” and by the 1820s it housed ethnological materials from local and foreign cultures.<sup>47</sup> The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, founded in 1866, was the first museum dedicated to anthropology and archaeology.<sup>48</sup> Museums featuring anthropological materials proliferated throughout the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with displays often playing a role in nationalist narratives, as will be elaborated later.

Anthropological materials in natural history museums are rooted in the Western idea (prominent in science, art, and literature) of primitivism, which held that humans were originally “natural beings” who lived in nature in accordance with “natural laws” of society.<sup>49</sup> According to this view, displays of “primitive man” belonged with botanical, geologic, and zoological exhibits.<sup>50</sup> Scientists considered those living in tribal societies, so-called savages, to be at the same intellectual level as the earliest human

45. “Cabinet of Curiosities,” British Library, accessed Jan. 13, 2020, [www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item107648.html](http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item107648.html).

46. Don D. Fowler, “A Natural History of Man: Reflections on Anthropology, Museums, and Science,” in “Curators, Collections, and Contexts: Anthropology at the Field Museum, 1893–2002,” ed. Stephen E. Nash and Gary M. Feinman, special issue, *Fieldiana*, no. 36 (Sept. 2003): 12, [www.jstor.org/stable/29782665](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29782665).

47. *Ibid.*, 13.

48. Alaka Wali, Rosa Cabrera, and Jennifer Anderson, “Museum Anthropology,” Oxford Bibliographies, May 6, 2016, [www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0053.xml](http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0053.xml).

49. Fowler, 15.

50. *Ibid.*

ancestors. They were in a “primitive” stage of societal development, functioned as proxies for “original humanity,” and revealed truths about the origins of our species.<sup>51</sup> Scientists feared that these societies, so crucial to understanding human origins, were vanishing and that they were duty-bound to collect indigenous artifacts and bodies, which accounts for their accumulation in museums during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>52</sup> A central assumption of primitivism is that “the good” is inherently “the natural.” By contrast, members of “highly evolved, complex societies,” i.e., Western-influenced cultures, perceived their “modern” lifestyles, though superior, as “artificial, corrupt and alienating.”<sup>53</sup> Studying and thereby possessing the “essence” of “natural folk” through seeing them in museums was essential to the “alienated folk of high civilizations.”<sup>54</sup>

Worldwide, colonial power structures influenced how archaeological human remains were initially displayed in museums. European powers routinely plundered the graves of their colonized subjects and brought mummies, skulls, shrunken heads, and bodies back to Europe for study and display as “curiosities.”<sup>55</sup> Museum researchers and curators were “transfixed by the issue of race” and furthered narratives that exoticized indigenous groups or painted them as inferior.<sup>56</sup> For instance, during Argentina’s push for independence in the early nineteenth century, leaders established their national identity as European, at the expense of

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*

54. Scientists did not always nostalgically mourn the loss of the natural; some viewed the loss as an inevitably result of progress that could be mitigated by scientific “possession” of knowledge of the primitive. *Ibid.*

55. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 11.

56. O’Donnabhain and Lozada, 7.

indigenous populations. Argentinian museums collected and displayed the remains of indigenous peoples with the aim of documenting their “Otherness.”<sup>57</sup> In neighboring Brazil, researchers at the National Museum in the 1920s were influenced by eugenics and French and German craniometrics in their investigations of the African component of the Brazilian population.<sup>58</sup> From an academic perspective, human bones in museums were considered objects. Human remains were exhibited as “curiosities of scientific interest,” generally with little regard for the concerns or beliefs of the indigenous people involved.<sup>59</sup>

The most established scientific tradition of biological anthropology and anthropology museum collections is in the United States.<sup>60</sup> The development of this discipline owes much to the tradition of collecting bodies for anthropological science in the “bone rooms” of museums.<sup>61</sup> By 1776, Western European museums and collections had begun amassing the bodies of colonial subjects, both living and deceased.<sup>62</sup> The tradition of collecting remains in the United States traces back to Thomas Jefferson, who exhumed Native American graves.<sup>63</sup> In the early nineteenth century, American museum professionals noted that the Old World possessed “vastly superior and more significant relics,” which implied Europe’s

57. Ibid., 2.

58. Ibid., 4.

59. Ibid., 17.

60. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 3–4, 11.

61. Samuel Redman, video conference with the author, Jan. 8, 2020.

62. Ibid.

63. Gene Zechmeister, “Jefferson’s Excavation of an Indian Burial Mound,” Monticello, Oct. 2010, [www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-excavation-indian-burial-mound](http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-excavation-indian-burial-mound).

cultural superiority.<sup>64</sup> Nascent US museums aimed to “catch up” and “began collecting bodies ... with heretofore unseen zeal.”<sup>65</sup> This practice grew after the Civil War and during the westward expansion.<sup>66</sup> Museums gathered both foreign remains and the remains of the “red Indian” in the American West.<sup>67</sup> Most of the collected bodies belonged to non-white individuals, used by white researchers to prove scientific theories surrounding race.<sup>68</sup> As a result, about ninety percent of human remains in US natural history museums are Native American.<sup>69</sup> The racialized excavation of pre-Columbian graves contrasts with the historical study of gravesites containing bodies of Europeans; the result is that natural history “museums now hold the results of two centuries’ worth of scientific racism.”<sup>70</sup>

During this race to procure human remains, natural history museums came to view acquiring collections of skeletons as an investment in the emerging discipline of physical anthropology.<sup>71</sup> This attitude was

64. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 20.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 17.

67. Ibid., 20–21.

68. Ibid., 16.

69. Stephen E. Nash, “The Skeletons in the Museum Closet,” *Sapiens*, Oct. 29, 2018, [www.sapiens.org/column/curiosities/natural-history-museum-human-remains](http://www.sapiens.org/column/curiosities/natural-history-museum-human-remains).

70. Ibid; *scientific racism* is the manipulation of empirical evidence to support racial discrimination. Anthropological methods such as craniometry, racial typography, and racial hierarchies presented some “races” of humans as superior to others. Scientific racism condoned the politics of racial discrimination, though not all “scientific racists” were necessarily “political racists.” Craniometry is now only used to identify bodies of victims in forensic cases. See Paul A. Erickson and Liam D. Murphy, *A History of Anthropological Theory*, 5th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 152.

71. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 17.



influenced by the prolific craniologist Samuel George Morton who amassed around eight hundred skulls in the mid-nineteenth century, produced numerous highly regarded studies on brain size, and framed future debates in physical anthropology.<sup>72</sup> Eager to produce their own “racial taxonomies,” curators obtained remains opportunistically from distant contacts, acquaintances, and other sources with poorly verified provenance.<sup>73</sup>

The approach to excavations and acquisitions before 1890 was not systematic or scientific.<sup>74</sup> Professional archaeologists in the American West who excavated indigenous gravesites were far outnumbered by amateurs who looted and robbed graves and who sent the remains to museums.<sup>75</sup> Even professional archaeologists and anthropologists admitted to thievery: Franz Boas, who shipped bodies from indigenous gravesites in Canada to the United States under falsified invoices, lamented: “It is most unpleasant work to steal bones from a grave, but . . . someone has to do it.”<sup>76</sup> Facilitated by the newly reliable US postal network, “mysterious packages would arrive at museums—sometimes accompanied by vague, handwritten notes with brief descriptions of the bones inside”; knowing a bone’s supposed “racial origin” was often enough for admission into a collection, even without its individual identity or associated cultural affiliation.<sup>77</sup>

72. Morton’s studies are now regarded as unsystematic, pseudoscientific, and racist. See *ibid.*, 17, 23.

73. *Ibid.*, 17.

74. Donald Collier and Harry S. Tschopik Jr., “The Role of Museums in American Anthropology,” in “Curators, Collections, and Contexts: Anthropology at the Field Museum, 1893–2002,” ed. Stephen E. Nash and Gary M. Feinman, special issue, *Fieldiana*, no. 36 (Sept. 2003): 23, [www.jstor.org/stable/29782666](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29782666).

75. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 18, 35.

76. Julian Smith, “Insider: Who Owns the Dead?” *Archaeology Magazine*, Jan./Feb. 2011, [archive.archaeology.org/1101/departments/insider.html](http://archive.archaeology.org/1101/departments/insider.html).

77. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 18.

The unethical underpinning of natural history museums includes the Field Museum. Early exhibitions and publicity reflected primitivism and similar ideas, such as the “subjugation of the natural world in the name of Progress,” which implied the inferior place of “natural man” in the hierarchy of civilization.<sup>78</sup> While the Field displayed “primitive man” to a “civilized” audience, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Science and Industry displayed the “high art” and technology of “civilized man,” respectively.<sup>79</sup> This narrative paradigm remained prevalent until indigenous groups in the 1960s and academic critics in the 1970s decried the hierarchical symbolism of anthropological exhibitions in natural history museums and questioned the ideas that underpinned these institutions.<sup>80</sup> Their efforts sparked an ethical conversation that forced natural history museums to reckon with the past investigative aims of scientific racism, colonialism, and national pride and to consider the cultural histories and interests of tribes and families and their ancestors. Complicating this reckoning is the fact that the study of human remains from other cultures within the discipline of anthropology derives from different academic traditions.<sup>81</sup> “Many bioarchaeologies”

78. *Ibid.*, 19.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*, 20.

81. The fields of anthropology that study human remains are interdisciplinary, have varied academic histories, and often use overlapping terminology. They encompass physical anthropology, biological anthropology, bioarchaeology, skeletal biology, osteology, human osteology, osteoarchaeology, and paleoanthropology, among others. The diversity of terminology reflects differences in academic, linguistic, and cultural traditions in which the study of the human body has evolved. Biological and physical anthropology are equivalent terms and approach human evolution and biosocial variation. All other categories can be considered subdisciplines of biological anthropology.

have emerged, each with its own terminologies and methodologies.<sup>82</sup> For example, biological anthropologists were initially focused not on medical knowledge, as medical museums were, but on racial classification.<sup>83</sup> Consequently, there is no one unified story of how human remains came to be displayed in anthropological contexts.<sup>84</sup>

Movements for the repatriation of human remains from museums to their living descendants for reburial gained currency in the wake of civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s, with groups worldwide challenged the prevailing notion of the indigenous body as an object for study.<sup>85</sup> These demands were particularly vociferous among Native groups in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. Many Native American groups objected to museum displays of their ancestor's bodies, which violated traditional burial practices.<sup>86</sup> Repatriation activists contended that museum displays violated their rights to care spiritually for their ancestors, that displays were shrouded in legacies of colonialism and racism, and that the dead never gave consent for their

82. O'Donnabhain and Lozada, 12.

83. Museum anthropology predates the establishment of the four-field method in the 1920s, which divides anthropology into physical, sociocultural, archaeological, and linguistic studies. This approach is attributed to Franz Boas, but historian of anthropology Dan Hicks points to anthropologist Augustus Pitt-Rivers's earlier diagrams as delineating the fields of anthropology. See Dan Hicks, "Charter Myths and Time Warps from St. Louis to Oxford," *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 6 (2013): 753–63; see, also, Adam Kuper, "Anthropology: Scope of the Discipline," in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Hilary Callan (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017), 1–25, doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1591.

84. Kuper, 1.

85. Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5.

86. Ibid.

remains to be treated in this manner.<sup>87</sup> Lacking strong social and legal standing, indigenous protesters chained themselves to museum display cases, enacted citizen's arrests of bioarchaeologists studying ancestral bones, and picketed archaeological sites.<sup>88</sup>

Indigenous repatriation movements were highly effective in swaying social perceptions and persuading legislators to act. Museum policy and legislation in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand now recognize the rights of indigenous descendants to ancestral remains, although these rights are not codified in a single transnational law.<sup>89</sup> The National Museum of the American Indian Act (NMAIA) of 1989 and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 covers all Native American human remains in the United States. The remains are the property of the tribes, although within a museum they are under federal "control." Museums that receive federal funds are required to inventory collections of human remains and associated funerary materials and to consult with indigenous groups to return the remains to descendants or otherwise reach agreement on disposal.<sup>90</sup> As of May 14, 2010, NAGPRA § 10.11 required museums or federal agencies to initiate consultation with tribes to transfer remains to descendants,

87. Chip Colwell, "The Long Ethical Arc of Displaying Human Remains," *Atlas Obscura*, Nov. 16, 2017, www.atlasobscura.com/articles/displaying-native-american-remains.

88. Ibid.

89. Cressida Fforde, Jane Hubert, and Paul Turnbull, eds., *The Dead and Their Possessions: Repatriation in Principle, Policy and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

90. Francis P. McManamon, "An Introduction to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)," National Park Service, 2003, www.nps.gov/archeology/tools/laws/nagpra.htm.

which many indigenous activists regard as a legal victory.<sup>91</sup> Due to increased social awareness of the ethical problems associated with displaying human remains and increased legal protections achieved by repatriation movements, the display of colonial-era indigenous remains is no longer commonplace or socially acceptable in North American and Australasian museums.

The rhetoric of indigenous activism in the 1960s and 1970s focused on righting the wrongs of past colonialism worldwide.<sup>92</sup> The case for repatriation took a three-pronged approach, with arguments centered around spirituality, racism, and consent. Activists argued that museums violated their indigenous religious freedom and prevented them from practicing traditional ways of caring for ancestors, that the history of museum collection of indigenous people was steeped in racism, and that the people displayed in museum exhibits never consented to have their remains treated in this manner.<sup>93</sup> Susan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne and Hodulgee Muscogee), the executive director of the National Congress of American Indians, made the case for legal protection against the use of American Indian remains in museums in 1989:

What if museums, universities and government agencies could put your dead relatives on display or keep them in boxes to be cut up

91. Prior to NAGPRA indigenous groups had to initiate repatriation claims. See “43 CFR § 10.11: Disposition of Culturally Unidentifiable Human Remains,” Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, accessed Oct. 28, 2021, [www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/43/10.11](http://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/43/10.11); Clayton W. Dumont Jr., “Contesting Scientists’ Narrations of NAGPRA’s Legislative History: Rule 10.11 and the Recovery of ‘Culturally Unidentifiable’ Ancestors,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 5, [doi.org/10.1353/wic.2011.0009](https://doi.org/10.1353/wic.2011.0009).

92. Dumont, 17.

93. Colwell, “The Long Ethical Arc,” *Atlas Obscura*.

and otherwise studied? What if you believed that the spirits of the dead could not rest until their human remains were placed in a sacred area? The ordinary American would say there ought to be a law—and there is, for ordinary Americans. The problem for American Indians is that there are too many laws of the kind that make us the archeological property of the United States and too few of the kind that protect us from such insults.<sup>94</sup>

Harjo urged Congress to enact legislation to prevent museums treating human remains as artifacts. Compellingly, she noted that the 1.5 million living American Indians are outnumbered by the deceased stored in museums, educational institutions, federal agencies, and private collections.

A diverse coalition, including American Indian tribes, the American Civil Liberties Union, eighteen religious denominations, the Society of American Archaeology, and the American Association of Museums, supported legislation.<sup>95</sup> The emotional resonance of repatriation concerns and the persuasive rhetoric of Harjo and other activists helped sway public opinion and earn the support of American lawmakers. Morris K. Udall (D-AZ) introduced NAGPRA in the House on July 10, 1990, and

it received strong bipartisan support.<sup>96</sup> Framed as civil rights legislation,

94. Susan Shown Harjo, “Last Rites for Indian Dead: Treating Remains Like Artifacts Is Intolerable,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 16, 1989, [www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-09-16-me-21-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-09-16-me-21-story.html).

95. Alison Jane Edwards, “Grassroots Social Action and the National Museum of the American Indian” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2015), 177–78, [dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/16461039/EDWARDS-DISSERTATION-2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/16461039/EDWARDS-DISSERTATION-2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y); Steve Johnson, “Museum’s Blackfeet Remains to Go Home,” *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 20, 1991, [www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1991-10-20-9104040573-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1991-10-20-9104040573-story.html).

96. C. Timothy McKeown, “Implementing a ‘True Compromise’: The Native

John McCain (R-AZ) supported the bill in the Senate on October 26, 1990: “The passage of this legislation marks the end of a long process for many Indian tribes and museums. The subject of repatriations is charged with high emotions in both the Native American community and the museum community. I believe this bill represents a true compromise.”<sup>97</sup> President George H. W. Bush signed it into law on November 16, 1990.<sup>98</sup> The unanimous passage of NAGPRA made the museum display of American Indian remains illegal in government-funded exhibitions.

At the Field Museum, curators took many artifacts off display in the Native North America Hall. The hall, first opened in the 1950s under the name “Indians before Columbus,” was a repository of cultural items from numerous American Indian groups.<sup>99</sup> In 1991, the museum’s vice president, Jonathan Haas, attested that no Native American remains had been displayed at the Field Museum since 1989 and “few were before that.”<sup>100</sup> NAGPRA also required that museums repatriate associated funerary artifacts. A journalist reported that a “visitor to the museum

American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act after Ten Years,” in *The Dead and Their Possessions: Repatriation in Principle, Policy and Practice*, ed. Cressida Fforde, Jane Hubert, and Paul Turnbull (New York: Routledge, 2002), 108; Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, H.R. 5237, 101st Cong., (1990), [www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/house-bill/5237](http://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/house-bill/5237).

97. Congressional Record, Oct. 26, 1990, p. S17173.

98. “Native American Graves Protection and Repatriations Act of 1990, 25 U.S.C. § 3001 (1990),” [www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/25/3001](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/25/3001).

99. Lauren Frost, “Changing the Narrative in the Field Museum’s Native North America Hall,” *WBEZ*, Oct. 29, 2018, [www.wbez.org/stories/changing-the-narrative-in-the-field-museums-native-north-america-hall/4646fd66-8839-43fc-9c8c-f6eafa8dd3c8](http://www.wbez.org/stories/changing-the-narrative-in-the-field-museums-native-north-america-hall/4646fd66-8839-43fc-9c8c-f6eafa8dd3c8).

100. Johnson, “Museum’s Blackfeet Remains to Go Home,” *Chicago Tribune*.

these days will find ... some interesting absences” as “artifact removal forms litter the exhibits” and display cases are left empty.<sup>101</sup> After NAGPRA, the Field Museum consulted with the Hopi, Iroquois, Pawnee, Blackfeet, and Blood tribes, among others, on the “appropriateness of its exhibits.”<sup>102</sup> Viewers began to realize that the displays (over six-decades old) in the Native North America Hall were “outdated, “misrepresentative,” and “frozen in time.”<sup>103</sup> The Field Museum plans to open a modernized version of the exhibit in May 2022 with greater collaboration between museum curators and Native people.<sup>104</sup> In the meantime, Chicago-based artist Chris Pappan (Kaw) has superimposed multimedia ledger-style<sup>105</sup> “art interventions” over existing displays, bridging the gap between the colonialist narrative and the revised narrative, which will “bring Native voices to the museum.”<sup>106</sup>

NAGPRA, and the associated National Museum of the American Indian Act, remain the most significant pieces of legislation worldwide surrounding repatriation, yet many points of contention and implementation

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Ibid.*

103. Frost, “Changing the Narrative,” *WBEZ*.

104. “Field Museum & Indigenous Partners Announce Name, New Opening Date of Groundbreaking Native North America Hall Renovation,” Field Museum, Nov. 23, 2021, [www.fieldmuseum.org/about/press/field-museum-indigenous-partners-announce-name-new-opening-date-groundbreaking-native](http://www.fieldmuseum.org/about/press/field-museum-indigenous-partners-announce-name-new-opening-date-groundbreaking-native).

105. Plains Indians warriors created so-call ledger drawings in accountant ledger books during the late nineteenth century. See *Keeping History: Plains Indian Ledger Drawings*, Smithsonian, Nov. 13, 2019–Jan. 31, 2010, [americanhistory.si.edu/documentgallery/exhibitions/ledger\\_drawing\\_1.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/documentgallery/exhibitions/ledger_drawing_1.html).

106. Allison C. Meier, “An Artist Addresses the Field Museum’s Problematic Native American Hall,” *Chicago Magazine*, Jan. 8, 2018, [www.chicagomag.com/arts-culture/January-2019/Chris-Pappan-Field-Museum-Native-American-Halls;Field-Museum-to-Renovate](http://www.chicagomag.com/arts-culture/January-2019/Chris-Pappan-Field-Museum-Native-American-Halls;Field-Museum-to-Renovate),” Field Museum.



remain unresolved.<sup>107</sup> In the thirty years since NAGPRA became law, institutions have documented 197,280 human remains, but as of September 2019, archives still hold 188,187 remains, “pending consultation and/or notice.”<sup>108</sup> Only 40 percent of museums subject to NAGPRA have “resolved all Native American remains under their control.”<sup>109</sup> Museums often have poor collection records and tracing historical cultural affiliations of remains to federally recognized tribes is an archival and bioarchaeological puzzle on a massive scale.<sup>110</sup> The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography, for example, had never inventoried its vast stores of human remains, which were in an “unprofessional state of affairs.”<sup>111</sup> Other, smaller museums lack funds to comply with NAGPRA deadlines. Further, descendants may choose to keep remains in museums, and returning remains may result in dissension rather than harmony within the group receiving them.<sup>112</sup> Some Native American groups disagree over which is more closely affiliated to specific remains: some indigenous people think unprovenanced material should be reburied in the general area of origin, whereas others argue that such remains should be retained by the museum.<sup>113</sup>

107. Fforde, Hubert, and Turnbull, 7.

108. National Park Service, *Fiscal Year 2019 Report: National NAGPRA Program* (Washington, DC: US Department of Interior, 2019), 5, [irma.nps.gov/DataStore/DownloadFile/659339](https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/DownloadFile/659339).

109. *Ibid.*

110. McManamon, “An Introduction to NAGPRA,” National Park Service 2003.

111. *Ibid.*

112. Fforde, Turnbull, and Hubert, 7.

113. Other countries, like Australia, also face insufficient inventories and disputed repatriation claims. *Ibid.*, 6

The Field Museum has experienced similar difficulties staying on schedule with the NAGPRA inventory project, according to repatriation director Helen Robbins.<sup>114</sup> The Field has a large inventory from the 1980s, but its older inventory includes labels (once deemed scientifically sufficient), such as “at minimum one individual with extra femurs,” which under NAGPRA would indicate many people.<sup>115</sup> Robbins wryly comments on the widespread inventory problems found across institutions: “When you have a skeleton that consists of five different people from five different races all jumbled up ... in a damp box, that’s, well, not very good” for repatriation.<sup>116</sup> When Robbins began the repatriation project in November 2002, the museum estimated completion within three years, but Robbins is still at it—seventeen years later. At first, she worked alone, but recently, a part-time bioarchaeologist and an assistant help with the intensive research required to fulfill repatriation claims.

The Field Museum has received over twenty-two federal NAGPRA repatriation grants, but the museum itself paid for one of the most high-profile repatriation incidents.<sup>117</sup> Inuit leaders in Labrador, Canada, learned in 2008 that the Field housed the skeletal remains of twenty-two people who had been excavated from marked graves in the Moravian missionary village of Zoar in 1928 and requested their repatriation.<sup>118</sup> NAGPRA does not mandate or fund repatriation of international claims. The museum

114. Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

115. *Ibid.*

116. The Field Museum does not store remains in damp conditions, but Robbins witnessed numerous state repositories housing remains in damp cardboard boxes in basements. Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

117. *Ibid.*

118. William Mullen, “Field Museum to Return Inuit Remains,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 19, 2010, [www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2010-07-19-ct-met-inuit-remains-repatriated-20100719-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2010-07-19-ct-met-inuit-remains-repatriated-20100719-story.html).

agreed to the “expensive endeavor,” which included renting a plane and a longliner for the transfer to Labrador, because “it was very plain that the Field Museum was in the wrong.”<sup>119</sup> The bodies were returned in 2011, and the Field Museum presented a formal apology letter to the Inuit signed by the chairman of the Board of Trustees, which Robbins is “pretty sure no other institution has ever done for a specific group.”<sup>120</sup> In response, the Labrador Inuit sent the Field Museum a letter of forgiveness, which was “very generous because they did not need to do that. . . . I was honored.” In 2017, the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, an organization representing the rights and interests of the Inuit people, gave the Inuit Cultural Repatriation Award to the Field Museum and the Nunatsiavut Government for their commitment to “reconciliation” and an “ongoing positive relationship.”<sup>121</sup>

Not all anthropologists share Robbins’s commitment to collaborating with indigenous people on repatriations. Physical anthropologist Elizabeth Weiss recounts her experience of feeling like a pariah for studying dead bodies during an emotionally charged post-NAGPRA discussion at an archaeology conference:

Weren’t we innocent until proven guilty? No, we were guilty for the sins of others; those anthropologists of the past who studied race differences, the Europeans who came and took the land, and any other historical group who displaced the minorities. I realized this when another Native American spoke up and said that I didn’t know how it felt to be a victim and, therefore, shouldn’t be voicing my opinion. According to them, I did not come from an oppressed

119. Ibid.; Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

120. Mullen, “Field Museum to Return Inuit Remains,” *Chicago Tribune*.

121. “National Inuit Org Honours Return of Stolen Nunatsiavut Remains,” *Nunatsiaq News*, Sept. 26, 2017, [nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674national\\_inuit\\_org\\_honours\\_return\\_of\\_stolen\\_nunatsiavut\\_remains](http://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674national_inuit_org_honours_return_of_stolen_nunatsiavut_remains).

or victimized social group. An anthropologist then spoke the unthinkable, comparing me to a Nazi while tears were running down her cheeks. She said she never wanted to touch another skeleton in her life.<sup>122</sup>

Weiss devotes a chapter of *Reburying the Past* (2008) towards making the case for “Anthropologists as the Good Guys,” in which she argues that modern criticisms judge past archaeological collection practices through today’s morals.<sup>123</sup> According to Weiss, NAGPRA gives too much credence to Native American cultural traditions and oral histories in determining repatriation: “The oral traditions of alien abductions in New Mexico” are just as valid as “the creation myths of the Native Americans.”<sup>124</sup> Weiss objects to NAGPRA positing Native beliefs as equal to science in explaining reality, claiming that the spirituality grounding many repatriation claims is a less legitimate form of knowledge production than science.<sup>125</sup>

In counterpoint to the Labrador Inuit, not all indigenous people are eager for reconciliation. Sociologist Clayton W. Dumont Jr. (Klamath Tribes) condemns archaeologists and anthropologists who defend NAGPRA §10.11 as hypocritical and guilty of historical revisionism.<sup>126</sup> Dumont says NAGPRA is a legal “victory in the centuries-long struggle of Native peoples to protect our dead . . . from scientists” and contends

122. Elizabeth Weiss, *Reburying the Past: The Effects of Repatriation and Reburial on Scientific Inquiry* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science, 2008), 2.

123. Ibid., 25, 29.

124. Ibid., 41.

125. Ibid.

126. Dumont, 5–41. Dumont, a professor of sociology at San Francisco State University, studies the history of science from a post-structural perspective. He is not affiliated with the Field Museum but comments on the actions of museums like the Field.

that critiques of section 10.11 reveal the extent to which archaeologists have used “colonial prerogative” to paint a self-serving, rosy narrative of cooperation between museums and Native people.<sup>127</sup> He argues that although museums emphasize their relationships with indigenous people, their actions and words demonstrate a persistent prioritization of the “scientific,” the objectification of “our dead as data,” and the “masquerading the colonizer’s needs as everyone else’s.”<sup>128</sup> Dumont observes that scientific professional organizations “did their best to weaken” the amendment before calculating cynically that it was “politically astute to ‘get on board,’ lest they have to cease their incessant declarations of respect and admiration for Native peoples.”<sup>129</sup> He warns scientists that “their tenacity will be matched, step for step, by Native peoples—and then some” in the ongoing fight over Native bodies.<sup>130</sup>

To some, the reluctance of museums to display human remains in the wake of NAGPRA may in itself constitute an exercise of colonial power when it censors indigenous groups’ reasons for displaying their own dead. The Casa de Cultura in the central Mexican town of Xaltocan chose to display human remains, which conformed to the ethical guidelines espoused by the Vermillion Accord on Human Remains and Tamaki Makau-rau Accords on Human Remains and Sacred Objects.<sup>131</sup> Some

127. *Ibid.*, 32.

128. *Ibid.*

129. *Ibid.*, 33.

130. *Ibid.*, 34.

131. Indigenous community members established, curate, and run the museum; Canadian and Mexican archaeologists contributed to its establishment. Lisa Overholtzer and Juan R. Argueta, “Letting Skeletons out of the Closet: The Ethics of Displaying Ancient Mexican Human Remains,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24, no. 5 (May 28, 2018): 517, doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1390486. In 1989, World Archaeological Congress adopted the Vermillion Accord on Human Remains, which provides basic ethical guidelines; it was followed in 2006

North American archaeologist collaborators “criticized and censored” the museum and refused to include photographs of its displays in their publications, despite assurances that the community had given permission. The Society for American Archaeology (SAA) insisted that any photographs of human remains would be pixelated or removed from its publication, *Advances in Archaeological Practice*.<sup>132</sup> Xaltocan community members were baffled; they viewed the displays as an extension of Mesoamerican beliefs and practices, such as *Día de los Muertos*, which made them “accustomed to coexist[ing] with death.” A person said that “when we unearth the bones, we don’t get scared because they’re a part of us.”<sup>133</sup> The Canadian archaeologist, Lisa Overholtzer, and the Mexican archaeologist, Juan Argueta, argue that the SAA’s censorship amounts to the imposition of judgments of North American authorities on Mesoamericans and, thus, is a perpetuation of colonial practice.<sup>134</sup> They insist that the SSA and other organizations should not homogenize or ban representations of indigenous remains but instead should use “ethnographic methods to capture local norms and provide insight into what is considered proper treatment for human remains in particular contexts.”<sup>135</sup>

Interviewees expressed varied opinions in regards to this contentious and multifaceted cultural debate. The Field Museum’s repatriations director says the most important consideration is that a curator or an exhibitions manager “first ask the question” about the histories of bodies

by the Tamaki Makau-rau Accord on the Display of Human Remains and Sacred Objects. See “Code of Ethics,” World Archaeological Congress, accessed Feb. 15, 2019, worldarch.org/code-of-ethics.

132. Overholtzer and Argueta, 517–18.

133. *Ibid.*, 521–23.

134. *Ibid.*, 525.

135. *Ibid.*

that inform decisions on possible display.<sup>136</sup> Such questions should cover ethical rights, accession history, the tribal origins of the remains and descendants' wishes, the reasons for display, and public benefit. For example, Robbins and Janet Hong, project manager for exhibitions, think that the display of Tibetan flutes made from human femurs is not unethical, because the flutes are a celebrated part of Tibetan spirituality and the Dalai Lama attended the exhibit opening, which suggests Tibetan approval of the display.<sup>137</sup> Robbins noted that some groups may object to the scientific study of their ancestors' remains for reasons related to colonial history, rather than current spiritual practices. Robbins paraphrases the concerns of Tasmanian repatriation claimants:

You [scientists] came here, you murdered us, you tried to destroy us, you stole our generations by putting us in boarding schools and now you want to do science on the remains of human beings you murdered and took away. ... Are you freaking out of your mind? ... That's not about science, that's about genocide. So I was trying to express ... complex arcs of belief and history and how complicated it is for everybody. ... I think the history of museum collections is complicated because history and science are intertwined in these ways and sometimes indigenous groups are against the science because of the history not because of the cultural beliefs.<sup>138</sup>

136. Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

137. Ibid and Janet Hong, video conference with the author, Dec. 24, 2020; Lara Dimitroff-Thompson, "Dalai Lama to Visit Chicago as Part of Exhibit," *Northwest Indiana Times*, Aug. 8, 1999, [www.nwitimes.com/uncategorized/dalai-lama-to-visit-chicago-as-part-of-exhibit/article\\_ff9563d3-a62d-5ec4-a61f-ae341351c621.html](http://www.nwitimes.com/uncategorized/dalai-lama-to-visit-chicago-as-part-of-exhibit/article_ff9563d3-a62d-5ec4-a61f-ae341351c621.html).

138. Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

The Canadian repatriation activist, Jodi Simkin, stresses that cultural consultations with Native groups should lead to museums take action, not further hesitation: "A lot of institutions are almost paralyzed by not wanting to do the wrong thing, but doing the wrong thing is the same as doing nothing."<sup>139</sup> When advising museums and tribes, Simkin is clear that collaboration is critical. She stresses the importance of involving indigenous people, who are still rare in museum leadership, in constructing new museum narratives, but she remains hopeful that the "conversation is changing" among the scientific community, the cultural heritage sector, and the indigenous community.<sup>140</sup> She also stresses the need to refrain from vilifying museum workers, who were not responsible for the past actions of their institutions, with the caveat that museum leaders who do not collaborate with indigenous and other concerned parties repeat the faults of the past.<sup>141</sup>

Retired anthropology curator, Robert Martin, speaks of the need to "find an appropriate balance" between the "feelings of the population" from which human remains have been taken and the "legitimate interests of research" at the Field Museum and worldwide.<sup>142</sup> His concern is that repatriation and reburial hinder scientific research. Simkin points out that not every indigenous community is opposed to scientific research, which may reveal aspects of their history. Martin insists that removing funereal objects from display creates insular communities and closes a door on the "opportunity for intercultural dialogue" that museums present.<sup>143</sup>

Opinions vary as well among indigenous groups. Many indigenous groups and scientists in the Americas are collaborating to present

139. Jodi Simkin, telephone interview with author, Jan. 13, 2020.

140. Ibid.

141. Ibid.

142. Robert Martin, email message to author, Feb. 7, 2020.

143. Ibid.



narratives of human remains that move beyond colonial ideals. In Mexico, some bioarchaeologists are using dental and skeletal specimens as a “venue for cultural reassertion of the modern Maya.” The Maya Museum in Mérida has been designed to “reach out also to indigenous visitors.” Displays include 3D facial reconstructions of the skull of Bernardino Cen, a Maya Caste War hero, and other Native individuals and integrate narratives of various aspects in Maya society.<sup>144</sup> However, as Simkin explains, the exhibit is curated primarily from an archaeological rather than an indigenous perspective, whereas Canadian museums display very few indigenous remains.<sup>145</sup> Canadian institutions are moving towards narratives that focus on the history of aboriginal peoples. For example, the Royal British Columbia Museum, which once exhibited the remains of First Nations people, now consults with Native peoples about museum narratives, and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia co-curates displays with indigenous community members.<sup>146</sup>

In contrast, certain indigenous communities, such as Maya-speaking groups in Yucatan and Guatemala, have not sought repatriation of the bodies of their ancestors, which may be due to the imposition of European modes of thought on indigenous populations.<sup>147</sup> Spanish colonists forced the assimilation of the Maya as a means to forge a new, “Christianized” colonial society though cultural repression and destruction of Native heritage. As a result, some modern-day Mayan speakers do not see

144. Vera Tiesler and Andrea Cucina, “Past, Present and Future Perspectives in Maya Bioarchaeology: A View from Yucatan, Mexico,” in *Archaeological Human Remains: Global Perspectives*, ed. Barra O’Donnabhain and María Cecilia Lozada (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2014), 171.

145. Jodi Simkin, telephone interview with author, Jan. 13, 2020

146. Ibid.; Anita Herle, “Museums and First Peoples in Canada,” *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 6 (Oct. 1994): 46, [www.jstor.org/stable/40793553](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40793553).

147. O’Donnabhain and Lozada, 176.

themselves as culturally affiliated with pre-Hispanic human remains. A similar mentality is evident in some modern Peruvians who are indifferent to the display of human remains; bodies on display are seen as belonging to “*indigenas*,” while some Peruvians today identify more with Spanish cultural heritage.<sup>148</sup>

Repatriation claims, contrary to the prognostications of some physical anthropologists, have not eliminated the practice of displaying human remains. With the exception of Native American or Australasian aboriginal bodies, museums around the world still exhibit remains.<sup>149</sup> A case in point are Egyptian mummies, which frequently tour worldwide. Western fascination with Egyptian mummies date to Napoleon’s conquest of North Africa in 1798.<sup>150</sup> This fascination is still apparent in contemporary displays, such as at the Field Museum, where CT scans allow the public to unwrap specimens digitally.<sup>151</sup> The practice of displaying Egyptian mummies continues largely without ethical censure, because modern Egypt communities, which are primarily Muslim or Coptic Christian, do not claim cultural continuity with the pharaohs in the same way that Native Americans or Australian Aboriginal groups relate to their ancestors. While it is certain that European archaeologists plundered ancient Egyptian gravesites for colonial purposes, some scholars, such as the anthropologist Chip Colwell, argue that their treatment of Egyptian mummies “glorified ancient Egypt while Native American skeletons were long collected to dehumanize indigenous peoples.”<sup>152</sup>

148. María Cecilia Lozada, interview with the author, Nov. 6, 2019.

149. Herle, 45.

150. Colwell, “The Long Ethical Arc,” Atlas Obscura.

151. “Inside Ancient Egypt,” Field Museum, Nov. 11, 2010, [www.fieldmuseum.org/exhibitions/inside-ancient-egypt](http://www.fieldmuseum.org/exhibitions/inside-ancient-egypt).

152. Colwell, “The Long Ethical Arc,” Atlas Obscura.

Further, modern Egypt's dependence on tourism guarantees that pharaohs will continue to be displayed.<sup>153</sup>

Egyptian demands for the repatriation of ancient Egyptian artifacts, sometimes including bodies, are based on nationalist rather than ethical claims. These arguments maintain that it is the prerogative of Egyptians to display their cultural heritage in national museums, but they do not question the ethics of human-remains display per se. Repatriation activists from other cultures would find the explicit display methods of repatriated Egyptian remains troubling if applied to remains of their own heritage.<sup>154</sup> The opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum, now planned for November 2022, will present all of King Tutankhamun's tomb artifacts "in an incredibly realistic manner that enables visitors to experience the tomb just as it was" and will feature "intimate glimpses into his life," even the bodies of Tutankhamun's two stillborn daughters.<sup>155</sup> The museum's general director, Tarek Sayed Tawfik, wants to "welcome guests from all over the world, but mainly ... new Egyptian generations," whom he hopes will take "pride in their ancient culture."<sup>156</sup>

The Ethiopian government acted on similarly nationalist principles when displaying the fossilized bones of *Australopithecus afarensis*, says Zeresenay Alemseged, the paleoanthropologist who discovered a specimen of this early human ancestor who lived around 3.3 million years

153. Arwa Gaballa, "Egypt Uncovers Chamber of Mummies, Sees Life for Tourism," *Reuters*, May 13, 2017, [www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-archaeology-discovery-idUSKBN1890F8](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-archaeology-discovery-idUSKBN1890F8).

154. Jodi Simkin, telephone interview with author, Jan. 13, 2020.

155. Allison Keyes, "For the First Time, All 5,000 Objects Found Inside King Tut's Tomb Will Be Displayed Together," *Smithsonian Magazine*, Dec. 21, 2016, [www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/grand-egyptian-museum-next-big-thing-180961333](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/grand-egyptian-museum-next-big-thing-180961333).

156. *Ibid.*

ago.<sup>157</sup> Ethiopia took such great pride in the discovery that they asked Alemseged to meet President Barack Obama as Ethiopia's national representative.<sup>158</sup> Today, "Selam" and another *A. afarensis* fossil, "Lucy," reside in the National Museum of Ethiopia, which links the fossils to statues of nineteenth- and twentieth-century heroes and other nationalistic items. This biological-cultural narrative is summarized in the exhibition title, a "Million Years of Life and Culture in Ethiopia."<sup>159</sup>

### Museums and Spectacle: Science v. "Edutainment Extravaganza"

The display of human remains has been fraught with tensions between public education and spectacular entertainment from the period of dissections in Renaissance anatomy schools to nineteenth-century freak shows, and from seventeenth-century cabinets of curiosities to Victorian-era public mummy unwrapping, to current *Body Worlds* traveling shows. Investigating these tensions exposes a dilemma over what the anthropology museum should be: a place for the public to engage with serious science or to experience popular entertainment.

The scientific community contributed to and fed off of the US public's curiosity with human remains in the nineteenth century. Museums encouraged the public to "collect" human remains and donate them to museums, promoting what today would be characterized as grave

157. Zeresenay Alemseged, interview with the author, Nov. 13, 2019.

158. *Ibid.*

159. "The National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa," *Independent Travellers*, accessed Jan. 29, 2020, [independent-travellers.com/ethiopia/addis\\_ababa/national\\_museum](http://independent-travellers.com/ethiopia/addis_ababa/national_museum).

robbing.<sup>160</sup> The public read about scientific specimens in newspapers and fiction, which strengthened their eagerness to see the bodies themselves. Archaeological discoveries, such as mummies discovered in 1875 in the Aleutian Islands, were of “momentous” interest both to the “scientific world” and the average citizen.<sup>161</sup> Newspapers advertised the display of human remains in popular exhibitions at the first US World’s Fair, the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Fictionalized accounts and popular histories of Southwestern prehistory, such as *The Delight Makers*, *Some Strange Corners of Our Country*, and *The Land of the Cliff Dweller*, enjoyed great popularity in the 1890s.<sup>162</sup> Human remains became a significant attraction, while being presented as “scientific commodities” and “tools for solving riddles connected to race and time.”<sup>163</sup>

These “scientific” display of human remains sometimes had a tenuous connection to scientific research. Showmen and entrepreneurs, such as P. T. Barnum, sought to cash in on scientific cachet by presenting historical and pseudoscientific ideas in dramatized contexts.<sup>164</sup> In the *North American Review*, Barnum proposed an exhibition of the mummy of Rameses II, believing that Americans would rush to “know the countenance of the

160. In 1900 and 1904 military officials added Native bodies killed in American military conflicts and other buried Native remains to the Army Medical Museum collection and later transferred them to the Smithsonian. For this and other narratives about amateur collectors’ and grave robbers’ contributions to anthropology museums, see Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 35, 53.

161. “Alaskan Mummies,” *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 1875, [www.nytimes.com/1875/01/18/archives/alaskan-mummies-what-capt-hennig-found-in-the-aleutian-islands-an.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1875/01/18/archives/alaskan-mummies-what-capt-hennig-found-in-the-aleutian-islands-an.html).

162. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 18, 47.

163. *Ibid.*, 19.

164. *Ibid.*, 36.

despot” of the Old Testament and see the “marvel” of embalming.<sup>165</sup> He planned to purchase the “corpse of the King” for a sum of \$100,000, with crowds of paying customers at the World’s Columbian Exhibition bringing him an excellent return on his investment.<sup>166</sup> Barnum’s proposal combined attention-grabbing headlines, showmanship, and snippets of education to attract the morbid curiosity of crowds.<sup>167</sup> Although Barnum died before the fair opened, numerous exhibitions of Egyptian mummies throughout the nineteenth century became highly profitable enterprises.<sup>168</sup>

In Gilded Age America, archaeological discoveries of human remains found closer to home might lack the glamor of distant Egyptian kings, but small towns took pride in displaying them before they headed to large anthropological museums.<sup>169</sup> In 1892, a Durango, Colorado, newspaper announced free local exhibitions of mummies of remarkable caliber, containing “ten mummified bodies and eighteen or more skulls some with hair on them in a good state of preservation,” boasting that “it is questionable, indeed, whether [*sic*] the Smithsonian Institute in Washington possesses so complete and varied a collection of relics of an extinct race.”<sup>170</sup> The newspaper stressed the scientific value of the exhibits, arguing that they provide “abundant food for study and investigation.”<sup>171</sup>

165. “P. T. Barnum,” *World’s Fair Chicago 1893*.

166. *Ibid.*

167. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 36.

168. S. J. Wolfe and Robert Singerman, *Mummies in Nineteenth Century America: Ancient Egyptians as Artifacts* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).

169. In 1904 a Forest Service employee found a mummified body in Gila County, Arizona, which was displayed in a drugstore window of a nearby town for “a couple of days” before shipment to the Smithsonian. Redman, *Bone Rooms*, 42–43, 304 (note 66).

170. *Ibid.*

171. *Ibid.*

In contrast to showmen or ad hoc displays in the Southwest, early museum curators did not differentiate between the professional scientist and the public, with “no concessions to the limits of interest and attention span of the average visitor.”<sup>172</sup> In its early decades, the “museum men” at the Field felt an obligation to educate the public without catering specifically to them.<sup>173</sup> Early programs, popular lectures, and publications served educational purposes, but museum vitrines displayed a maximum of specimens with a minimum of interpretation.<sup>174</sup> They were more like open storage, with chronological and geographical labels; viewers were expected to use an “empirical approach” to study the exhibits and draw their own conclusions.<sup>175</sup>

Today, the Field Museum draws a sharp distinction between academic and amateur uses of collections and has moved away from displays of “open storage” without interpretive guidance. Exhibitions managers’ paramount consideration in designing new exhibits is to capture public attention. Hong, who has worked on several exhibitions containing human remains over seventeen years at the Field, explains that the modern museum exhibit draws on “a whole field of studies of public behavior, for instance in shopping malls or amusement parks, that tries to encourage certain behaviors.”<sup>176</sup> The museum uses similar principles to shopping-mall design, not to elicit a purchase, save for perhaps in the gift shop, but to prompt viewers to learn, discuss, and engage with research about scientific concepts. Managers use a “star object,” for example, SUE the *T. rex*, which will “have an immediate attraction” for visitors, and they pay attention to “flow” to create “an Aristotelian narrative

172. Collier and Tschopik, 25.

173. Ibid.

174. Ibid.

175. Ibid.

176. Janet Hong, video conference with the author, Dec. 24, 2020.

structure with a beginning, middle, and end,” which guides the viewer’s reception and reaction to the presentation.<sup>177</sup> In the case of human remains, such as an Egyptian mummy, Hong emphasizes that significant cultural consultation goes into decisions regarding the display of such an “object.”<sup>178</sup> Increased museum professionalism and societal awareness of the ethical issues of human-remains display have changed who can see human remains at the Field Museum, which bodies can be displayed, and for what reasons. According to Robert Martin, curator of biological anthropology (2001–13), the museum keeps human remains in locked storage and grants access only to “bona fide research workers” with approved research proposals.<sup>179</sup> Exhibitions staff and curators today play a larger role in guiding the public’s engagement with science, which makes it increasingly critical to examine the perspectives of those who create the displays and the motives behind which bodies are displayed and which are absent.

Human remains are undeniably “star objects.” The Field’s display of over twenty mummified individuals from Peru and Egypt was a major draw in 2012.<sup>180</sup> The museum recorded over 165,000 visitors in two months with an adult admission of twenty-nine dollars to *Opening the Vault: Mummies*, and the national tour “bolster[ed] the museum’s bottom line.”<sup>181</sup> Martin considers it “immaterial” whether a display is free or

177. Ibid.; “SUE the *T. rex*: Get to Know the Dinosaur Known as Specimen FMNH PR 2081,” Field Museum, Feb. 5, 2018, [www.fieldmuseum.org/blog/sue-t-rex](http://www.fieldmuseum.org/blog/sue-t-rex).

178. Janet Hong, video conference with the author, Dec. 24, 2020.

179. Robert Martin, email message to author, Feb. 7, 2020.

180. Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

181. Steve Johnson, “A First Look at the New ‘Mummies’ at the Field Museum,” *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 14, 2018, [www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/museums/ct-ent-mummies-field-museum-0315-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/museums/ct-ent-mummies-field-museum-0315-story.html).



accessible with an admission fee, as long as the display is “respectful and educational.”<sup>182</sup> Hong elaborated on this point by differentiating between two models of exhibition: the principled educational museum versus the “edutainment extravaganza,” much akin to a sideshow, whose sole purpose is profit.<sup>183</sup> Museum professionals have long argued that while museums may not profit directly from exhibitions, exhibitions attract visitors and prestige, which are critical for seeking donations from foundations, federal agencies, and philanthropists.<sup>184</sup> Museums may be tempted to mount displays of mummies and other human remains to raise their profile, which has its own set of ethical concerns.

Hong says that the World Columbian Exposition’s sensationalism and showmanship is an example of an “edutainment extravaganza.” However, as the successor of the 1893 World’s Fair, the Field Museum blurs this distinction. The very same bodies from the World’s Fair, which are now in the Field Museum’s collection, were displayed in the *Opening the Vault* exhibit, albeit with a scientific focus on CT technology for noninvasive visualizations.<sup>185</sup> Although the show was exceptionally well-received by the public, some were frustrated by the display. Simkin, the director of cultural affairs and heritage at the Klahoose First Nation, which seeks to repatriate the remains of their ancestors from museums internationally, noted that

182. Robert Martin, email message to author, Feb. 7, 2020.

183. Janet Hong, video conference with the author, Dec. 24, 2020.

184. Janet Hong, video conference with the author, Dec. 24, 2020. In the 1940s Donald Collier, Field Museum curator, reflected that “most museums are becoming increasingly dependent upon public support” and have vested financial interests in their collections and exhibits. The high cost of planning and executed exhibits does not keep pace with visitors’ demand for novelty. He concluded that “exhibits can never pay for themselves” and museums must turn to philanthropic support. See Collier and Tschopik, 27.

185. Johnson, “A First Look,” *Chicago Tribune*.

mummies are big business in the museum industry. We take great pains to bring traveling exhibits like *Mummies* from the Field Museum, which as you probably know allows a three-dimensional look inside the mummies, and the belongings that accompanied them. This was a temporary exhibit that toured, visiting I think four or five major communities—that, to me, is *horrific!* And I mean, I get it, I get that people have an interest in that, but the idea that we have exhumed someone’s remains and put them on display . . . that just doesn’t sit well with me. I think, if that were my ancestor or my relation, how devastating that would be. . . . We have to steer away from that. And yet at the same time, we have great prestige associated with those kinds of exhibits.<sup>186</sup>

Simkin believes that no deceased person should be displayed without their consent, regardless of when that person lived or the political or scientific context of the display. Simkin’s reaction reveals that what seems unambiguously “respectful and educational” to some may be “horrific” to others. It reveals as well that the subtle boundaries between respectable museum practice and “edutainment extravaganza” are currently shifting.

The most glaring instance of “edutainment extravaganza,” are the *Body Worlds* exhibitions that have toured worldwide since 1995 with over fifty million visitors, which makes it the “most successful traveling exhibition of all time.”<sup>187</sup> *Body Worlds* features the plastinated bodies of deceased people, most of them donors. These presentations add a “gloss of scientization to the dead,” while encouraging visitors to engage emotionally with health education and the concept of death.<sup>188</sup> *Body Worlds* focuses on anatomy rather than anthropology, but plastination, a process patented in

186. Jodi Simkin, telephone interview with author, Jan. 13, 2020.

187. “Philosophy,” *Body Worlds*.

188. Redman, “Reconsidering *Body Worlds*,” *Conversation*.

1977 where body fats and fluids are replaced by plastic, is a modern form of mummification.<sup>189</sup> To a greater extent than the Field Museum's *Opening the Vault*, these exhibits have conquered both the museum and popular entertainment market, selling tickets at accredited museums, including Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, but also at the Luxor Resort and Casino in Las Vegas.<sup>190</sup> "While museum administrators voiced concern that visitors would be horrified viewing actual human bodies on exhibit, the public has instead proven to have an almost insatiable thirst for seeing scientized dead."<sup>191</sup>

In 2004, *Der Spiegel* magazine implicated *Body Worlds* in a scandal over the source of bodies in its exhibits. The German anatomist, Gunther von Hagens, who is responsible for the showcases, agreed to return seven corpses to China, admitting that certain bodies in his exhibitions "might have" been executed prisoners.<sup>192</sup> At a *Body Worlds*' center in China "at least two corpses out of some 647" had "bullet holes in their skulls."<sup>193</sup> The center was near "three prison camps housing political detainees and Falun Gong practitioners, where dissidents are executed by shots to the head."<sup>194</sup> Von Hagens denied previous accusations of "buying remains of prisoners, homeless, and mentally ill people in Russia" and "insisted that

189. "Philosophy," *Body Worlds*; "Plastination Technique," *Body Worlds*.

190. "Our Exhibitions Worldwide," *Body World*, n.d., accessed Mar. 12, 2022, [bodyworlds.com/exhibitions/tickets](http://bodyworlds.com/exhibitions/tickets); "Bodies: The Exhibition," Luxor Las Vegas, n.d., accessed Mar. 12, 2022, [luxor.mgmresorts.com/en/entertainment/bodies-the-exhibition.html](http://luxor.mgmresorts.com/en/entertainment/bodies-the-exhibition.html).

191. Redman, "Reconsidering *Body Worlds*," Conversation.

192. Luke Harding, "Von Hagens Forced to Return Corpses to China," *Guardian*, Jan. 23, 2004, [www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jan/23/arts.china](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jan/23/arts.china).

193. *Ibid.*

194. *Ibid.*

all the people who appear in his exhibitions had signed releases prior to their death."<sup>195</sup>

More than a problem of museums' colonist past, the *Body Worlds* scandals demonstrate that the potential for "grave robbing" persists today, especially when profit is a primary motive for showing human remains. As Samuel Redman, a historian of human-remains collections, says, "follow the money and there's usually an interesting answer."<sup>196</sup> Investigating the lingering controversies associated with human-remains displays is important for stimulating ethical debates about contemporary public opinion and about the need for cautious practices in displaying mummified remains in museums and for-profit organizations.

## Authority and the Construction of Museum Narratives

A unifying theme in this thesis is who has the power to collect and own these bodies and who defines the narrative in human-remains display. This section explores narrative authority in depth. I first provide a brief history of museum authority, followed by two case studies, which explore (1) the narratives communicated by museum professionals through "paleoart" displays at the Field Museum, and the evolution of these narratives from racial pseudoscience and evolutionary superiority in the mid- to late twentieth century to current narratives of evolutionary connectivity and diversity; and (2) the emergence of alternative narratives outside of museum walls by Native groups seeking repatriation of Kennewick Man.

Museums in Europe and the United States adopted ideas of the French Revolution to transform the museum from a private collection of randomly chosen artifacts to "rational" public displays of artifacts

195. *Ibid.*

196. Samuel Redman, video conference with the author, Jan. 8, 2020.

within a narrative of progress.<sup>197</sup> Museums were “repositories and narrators” of official nationalism.<sup>198</sup> Tony Bennett argues that opening the museum to the wider public was a “regulating mechanism” of the state to civilize the working class through exposure to the “pedagogical mores of middle-class culture,” and Pierre Bourdieu argues that museums produce a dominant ideology as state-sponsored cultural institutions, which contribute to capitalist society and reproduce structural inequalities and ideals of nationhood.<sup>199</sup> Over the past fifty years, continuous scrutiny and criticism have destabilized the museum’s “cultural authority” to frame and affirm the pursuit of truth and to define what is historically and culturally significant.<sup>200</sup> Various theories (postmodernism, postcolonialism, feminism, Foucauldian) have questioned the authority of the museum.<sup>201</sup> These ongoing debates reveal that the construction of a museum narrative is subjective and that museums can no longer claim an uncontested objectivity as the source of authority and truth.<sup>202</sup> Prior to the 1980s, most museum literature contained reports about exhibitions, with only marginal commentary on the social and educational role of museums.<sup>203</sup> After the 1980s, scholars rejected the notion that

197. Jenkins, 57.

198. *Ibid.*

199. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 57.

200. Jenkins, 54–55.

201. *Ibid.*, 63.

202. *Ibid.*

203. Nick Merriman, *Beyond the Glass Case: The Past, the Heritage and the Public* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991).

museums present value-neutral facts.<sup>204</sup> Feminist and Foucauldian reflections on institutional power over the body called attention to the political ramifications of human-remains displays, and postcolonial theories influenced repatriation efforts and the view that museums were a “damaging reflection of the prejudices of European cultures.”<sup>205</sup>

A relevant case study for examining changing museum narratives is the display methods for representing long-deceased individuals, now known as “paleoart.”<sup>206</sup> These displays seldom contain human remains and, as such, avoid the ethical considerations discussed above. They are, however, a historic record of how museum professionals embody, capture, and present humanity within a scientific narrative. Ideas of scientific racism and primitivism, which made the anthropological collection and display of the physical remains of indigenous people acceptable, were reflected in the sculptural art in the Field Museum’s Hall of the Races of Mankind (1934–68) and the Hall of Prehistoric Man (1933–88).<sup>207</sup> With shifts in the anthropological narrative, the discipline has moved

204. Jenkins, 63.

205. *Ibid.*, 63, 117.

206. “The term paleoart was introduced in the late 1980s by the natural history illustrator, Mark Hallett (1986). . . . Paleoart became a catchy synonym to paleontological sculptures and paintings. Since then, this term has been widely used both in academic and informal media to refer to any artistic representation of a prehistoric organism or environment.” Marco Ansón, Manuel H. Fernández, and Pedro A. Saura Ramos, “Paleoart: Term and Conditions (A Survey among Paleontologists),” in *Current Trends in Paleontology and Evolution 13: Conference Proceedings* (Cercedilla, Spain: Early-Stage Researchers in Paleontology, April 15–18, 2015), 28, [www.researchgate.net/publication/275408446\\_Paleoart\\_Term\\_and\\_Conditions\\_A\\_survey\\_among\\_paleontologists](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/275408446_Paleoart_Term_and_Conditions_A_survey_among_paleontologists).

207. “Looking at Ourselves: Rethinking the Sculptures of Malvina Hoffman,” Field Museum, accessed Apr. 21, 2020, [www.fieldmuseum.org/exhibitions/looking-ourselves-rethinking-sculptures-malvina-hoffman](http://www.fieldmuseum.org/exhibitions/looking-ourselves-rethinking-sculptures-malvina-hoffman); Yastrow and Nash, 130, 135.

from racial differences and evolutionary progress to displays of evolutionary lineage among prehistoric and historic humans in the *Evolving Planet* exhibit (2006–present).<sup>208</sup>

Henry Field<sup>209</sup> conceived of the Hall of the Races of Mankind and approached the sculptor, Malvina Hoffman,<sup>210</sup> in the late 1920s to produce “morphologically accurate and emotionally expressive” life-sized figures representing the “155 racial types.”<sup>211</sup> The plan was winnowed down to twenty full-length figures, twenty-seven life-size busts, and one hundred life-size heads. For a fee of \$109,000 plus expenses, Hoffman traveled the world to observe all the “human types” featured in her work.<sup>212</sup> Unveiled in 1934, the wildly popular sculptures, based on living individuals, strove to capture racial types, “with particular emphasis being laid on primitive and lesser known peoples of the world.”<sup>213</sup> The museum dismantled the exhibit in 1968, by which time the “concept of race had

208. Kevin McKeough, “‘Evolving Planet’ Prompts Thoughts of Past, Future,” *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 13, 2006, [www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2006-03-13-0603130211-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2006-03-13-0603130211-story.html).

209. Grand-nephew to the museum’s benefactor, Marshall Field, and curator of anthropology at the Field Museum. See S. J. Redman, “Yesterday’s City: Henry Field’s Legendary Expeditions,” *Chicago History*, Fall 2006, 45, [issuu.com/chicagohistorymuseum/docs/2006fall-chm-chicagohistory-vol34-no3/s/11440618](http://issuu.com/chicagohistorymuseum/docs/2006fall-chm-chicagohistory-vol34-no3/s/11440618).

210. For a nuanced analysis of Hoffman’s contributions to the Field Museum’s racial typologies, see Tracy Lang Teslow, “Reifying Race: Science and Art in Races of Mankind at the Field Museum of Natural History,” in *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (London: Routledge, 1998), 53–76.

211. Yastrow and Nash, 131.

212. *Ibid.*

213. Henry Field, *The Races of Mankind: An Introduction to Chauncey Keep Memorial Hall* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1933), 13, [archive.org/details/racesofmankindin30fiel/page/n27/mode/2up?view=theater](http://archive.org/details/racesofmankindin30fiel/page/n27/mode/2up?view=theater).

become anathema to anthropologists.”<sup>214</sup> Though not strictly depicting human prehistory, this exhibit was part of a primitivism narrative, demonstrating how certain races were more representative of “original man” than others and, thus, conveyed a static vision of racial hierarchy. The reconfigured narrative of the current exhibit of fifty bronzes, *Looking at Ourselves: Rethinking the Sculptures of Malvina Hoffman*, considers the individuality of the subjects: the curators searched Hoffman’s notes for names and, where those were unspecified, did their best to ascribe each sculpture to an ethnic group.<sup>215</sup>

The Hall of Prehistoric Man, featuring bones of prehistoric humans and life-size sculptures of human ancestors, narrated an early concept of evolution that conflated biological evolution, cultural “advances” towards European society, and technological “progress.”<sup>216</sup> In the late 1920s, Henry Field asked sculptor Fredrick C. Blaschke to create realistic statues of prehistoric humans engaged in daily rituals to illustrate both societal and evolutionary progress. Starting with *Homo erectus*, then the earliest-known human ancestor, the hominid models were arranged in dioramas featuring real tools obtained from archaeological digs.<sup>217</sup> The exhibit featured the recently acquired skeleton of the Magdalenian Girl, then “the most complete European Upper Paleolithic skeleton in any museum in North America.”<sup>218</sup> An opening-day crowd of twenty-two hundred came to see “miss Cro-Magnon,” and the museum’s director

214. Yastrow and Nash, 135.

215. “Looking at Ourselves: Rethinking the Sculptures of Malvina Hoffman,” Field Museum.

216. Yastrow and Nash, 135.

217. *Ibid.*, 136.

218. *Ibid.*, 137; Stephen E. Nash, “The Blockbuster Exhibit that Shouldn’t Have Been,” *Sapiens*, Nov. 30, 2021, [www.sapiens.org/column/curiosities/magdalenian-girl](http://www.sapiens.org/column/curiosities/magdalenian-girl).



could “hardly believe his eyes.”<sup>219</sup> Field remarked that this was the “first exhibit to capture the public and press imagination” so thoroughly, and he encouraged the president and Board of Trustees to finance more life-like dioramas.<sup>220</sup> Installed in 1933, the Hall of Prehistoric Man remained virtually unchanged for half a century, despite dated cultural notions and chronology. The museum dismantled it in 1988.<sup>221</sup>

The modern successor of the Hall of Prehistoric Man is *Evolving Planet*. This exhibition contains the sculptural reconstruction of Selam, the juvenile *A. afarensis* fossil, 60 percent intact, found at Dikika, Ethiopia, in 2000 by the paleoanthropologist, Zeresenay Alemseged.<sup>222</sup> Selam’s bones are displayed in Ethiopia, but Alemseged collaborated with paleoartist Élisabeth Daynès to reconstruct what Selam might have looked like when she lived 3.3 million years ago. Daynès says that her sculptural work is the result of “uninterrupted dialogue” with scientists, anatomists, anthropologists, paleopathologists, and paleogeneticists to provide the most lifelike vision of the individual possible.<sup>223</sup> When remains are intact, she makes casts of the cranium and other bones; when remains are fragmented, she works with laboratories and scientists to reconstruct the bones digitally, then “materializes it” using 3D printing.<sup>224</sup> Her forensic analysis of the bones produces an “identity card” of the subject, comprising such factors as age, sex, pathologies, diet, and living conditions. The

219. Yastrow and Nash, 136.

220. Ibid.

221. Ibid.

222. “DIK-1-1,” Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, accessed Mar. 13, 2022, [humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/fossils/dik-1-1](http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/fossils/dik-1-1); “Dikika Research Project,” California Academy of Science, accessed Mar. 13, 2022, [www.calacademy.org/scientists/projects/dikika-research-project](http://www.calacademy.org/scientists/projects/dikika-research-project).

223. Élisabeth Daynès, email message to the author, Mar. 9, 2020.

224. Ibid.

identity card and references to other hominids inform her vision of the individual as she “fleshes out” its body; she acknowledges the more the paleoartist “moves away” from the bone structure, the more the likeness becomes subjective and interpretive.<sup>225</sup>

In contrast to the racialized narratives of the Halls of Prehistoric Man and the Races of Mankind, Daynès and Alemseged stress the modern viewers’ connection to diverse prehistoric humans. For Daynès, her representations are both scientific—a “synthesis of knowledge on the origins of man” and as accurate as possible—and visceral—a “face-to-face meeting between these individuals and the public” so that they can experience looking into the eyes of someone who lived millions of years ago.<sup>226</sup> Precision and details generate “empathy and understanding” to guide the public to “be sensitive to the human family” and to “question our origins.”<sup>227</sup> Alemseged believes that paleoart allows visitors to “communicate with their ancestors,” giving them an “enriched passion” and prompting scientific curiosity. He notes that people point naturally to themselves, then to their family and friends, in photographs. Presenting Selam as a human encourages viewers to relate to her as a part of the story of human evolution. From there, he says, people can envision our situation as a species within deep time and can understand the place of *Homo sapiens* within the broader biodiversity of our planet.<sup>228</sup> *Evolving Planet*’s physical representations of Selam, and another *A. afarensis* fossil, Lucy, do not present living humanity, *H. sapiens sapiens*, as superior to the past, but as a small stage of a long evolutionary lineage.

A primary objective of human-remains exhibits in museums has been to satisfy longstanding curiosity about our origins, histories, mortality,

225. Ibid.

226. Ibid.

227. Ibid.

228. Zeresenay Alemseged, interview with the author, Nov. 13, 2019.

and identities. This curiosity drives the persistent popularity of these displays.<sup>229</sup> Rather than dismiss the desire to see the remains of the dead as morbid, perverse, or voyeuristic, Hong says, “I don’t think people should be denigrated for being titillated by things they don’t know.”<sup>230</sup> “Even to the most nihilistic isolationist human being,” says Robbins, “contemplation is important—that knowledge [the viewer] can get from the human body about who [these people] were, or what they did.”<sup>231</sup> Seeing the human body displayed in an anthropological setting provides a unique opportunity for viewers to reflect on their humanity, an opportunity which many museum visitors crave. Alemseged says that evoking the viewer’s “scientific curiosity” and their “nostalgic curiosity” through displaying human remains can encourage deeper thinking: “We are dealing with a very symbolic species. *Homo sapiens* love to imagine,” so the best way to encourage reflection is to have viewers look at “something that’s part of them.”<sup>232</sup> To Alemseged, displaying human remains harnesses the psychological mechanism of humans to relate themselves to the things they see, in order to “present the public with the [scientific] data that they need to understand where they come from.” Repatriation Director Robbins also stresses the responsibility of the museum for scientific accuracy, musing that “if you portray an *Australopithecus* riding around on a Tasmanian devil ... that’s unethical.”<sup>233</sup> Paleoartist John Gurche takes this farther, emphasizing that the museum has an obligation to the public to demonstrate that evolution is more than a “fantasy” concocted by some scientist, but is a concept that viewers can comprehend

229. Samuel Redman, video conference with the author, Jan. 8, 2020.

230. Janet Hong, video conference with the author, Dec. 24, 2020.

231. Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

232. Zeresenay Alemseged, interview with the author, Nov. 13, 2019.

233. Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

through their own experience.<sup>234</sup> Finally, Alemseged believes that communicating a scientific understanding of our past could be critical to the future survival of our species, by generating understanding of our connection to the broader biodiversity of the planet and affecting the questions we ask and decisions we make going forward.<sup>235</sup>

The Field Museum dismantled the Hall of the Races of Mankind in 1968 and the Hall of Prehistoric Man 1988 in response to alternative narratives that arose from the repatriation and civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s. These narratives altered not only how museum professionals develop exhibits, such as the *Evolving Planet*, but also establish alternative authorities on managing human remains within or destined for museums. To understand this expansion of authority, the next case study considers the repatriation debate of Kennewick Man and exposes the “crisis of cultural authority” within museums. Repatriation cases concern five claimant groups over the ownership of human remains. The first is direct descendants, such as indigenous groups claiming ancestry or cultural affiliation under NAGPRA. The second is scientists who assert their right to study the body to generate knowledge. The third is museums, affiliated with scientific authority, who draw on institutional and cultural prestige to safeguard those remains. The fourth is the landowner where the body was found or the nation-state to which the body belongs. A final claimant is the lawmakers and courts, who have the authority to broker a compromise between other parties. All these claimants had a stake in the discovery of Kennewick Man.

234. John Gurche, telephone interview with the author, Jan. 11, 2020.

235. Zeresenay Alemseged, interview with the author, Nov. 13, 2019.

Kennewick Man, or the Ancient One, lived nine thousand years ago.<sup>236</sup> Found in Kennewick, Washington, in 1996, the discovery led to a twenty-year court battle between scientists and indigenous groups. The Umatilla people and a coalition of other tribes, citing their cultural beliefs, claimed the remains for reburial under NAGPRA. The landowners, the US Army Corps of Engineers, sided with the Umatilla, but two archaeologists, James Chatters and Douglas Owsley, backed by the Smithsonian, filed a lawsuit on behalf of the rights of scientists to study Kennewick Man.<sup>237</sup> The archaeologists argued that the bones resembled the Ainu rather than modern Native Americans.<sup>238</sup> A “court ruled in 2002 that the bones were not related to living tribes: thus NAGPRA did not apply. The judge ordered the corps to make the specimen available to the plaintiffs for study.”<sup>239</sup> A subsequent study found that Kennewick Man’s origins could not be determined via DNA.<sup>240</sup> Chatters and Owsley revisited cranial measurements in 2014 and hypothesized that Kennewick Man was related to Pacific Rim seafarers, overturning the theory that inhabitants of the Americas arrived via the Bering Land Bridge.<sup>241</sup> Their

236. “Kennewick Man Skeletal Find May Revolutionize Continent’s History,” *ScienceDaily*, Apr. 26, 2006, [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/04/060425183740.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/04/060425183740.htm).

237. Douglas Preston, “The Kennewick Man Finally Freed to Share His Secrets,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, Sept. 2014, [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/kennewick-man-finally-freed-share-his-secrets-180952462](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/kennewick-man-finally-freed-share-his-secrets-180952462).

238. *Ibid.*

239. *Ibid.*

240. Morten Rasmussen et al., “The Ancestry and Affiliations of Kennewick Man,” *Nature* 523 (2015): 455–58, [doi.org/10.1038/nature14625](https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14625).

241. Preston, “The Kennewick Man Finally Freed,” *Smithsonian Magazine*.

study was not peer reviewed and used antiquated techniques.<sup>242</sup> New DNA sequencing methods in 2015 showed the presence of mitochondrial haplogroup X2a and Y-chromosome haplogroup Q-M3, found almost exclusively in Native Americans.<sup>243</sup> The remains were returned to the tribes for reburial on February 17, 2017.<sup>244</sup>

As with the Kennewick Man case, when asked whether the Field Museum owns the bodies it displays, interviewees expressed differing opinions. Hong, an exhibition manager affiliated with the museum, responds definitively: “Yes, I do.”<sup>245</sup> Robbins—as the museum’s repatriation director and situated between the descendants, the scientists, the museum, and the legalities of NAGPRA—takes a more nuanced perspective: “Legally the Field Museum does own some bodies. . . . But I think, if you ask certain lawyers, they will say you cannot own human remains, certainly in Britain under the Human Tissue Act. . . . In anthropology certain issues, like consent, factor in. . . . Maybe the question is not *can* you own a body, but *should* you. Ownership is just so socially contingent, I really don’t think anybody *knows* [if you can own a body].”<sup>246</sup> Simkin, who works with descendants, frames ownership as an issue of belonging: human remains belong at “home” with their Native communities, and she feels a profound responsibility to bring the deceased, “who can’t do anything for themselves,” back to their relatives and to help the community can

242. John Stang, “Burke Archaeologist Challenges Smithsonian over Kennewick Man,” *Crosscut*, Nov. 1, 2012, [crosscut.com/2012/11/kennewick-man-critique](http://crosscut.com/2012/11/kennewick-man-critique).

243. Rasmussen et al., 455–58.

244. “Tribes Lay Remains of Kennewick Man to Rest,” *Spokane Spokesman-Review*, Feb. 20, 2017, [www.spokesman.com/stories/2017/feb/20/tribes-lay-remains-of-kennewick-man-to-rest](http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2017/feb/20/tribes-lay-remains-of-kennewick-man-to-rest).

245. Janet Hong, video conference with the author, Dec. 24, 2020.

246. Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

“heal.”<sup>247</sup> Alemseged, as a scientist who navigates political considerations to bring his research to the public, comments that in one sense the Ethiopian government owns the story of Selam, whose *A. afarensis* remains are displayed in Addis Ababa, but that all humanity can claim ownership to Selam’s story of human evolution.<sup>248</sup>

As seen in the shift of museum narratives from racialized “progress” to evolutionary connections and in the successes of the repatriation movement, museums have become sites of theoretical debate about the construction of national histories and the representation of cultural groups. Although museum professionals have not relinquished claims to authority, they now avoid a singular scientific narrative in favor of collaborations with Native groups and engage in a “politics of recognition” of cultural narratives.<sup>249</sup> Field Museum curators consult increasingly with Native descendants, and the Native North America Hall features Native voices and artwork. The Field is now, “first, asking the questions” that lead to sensitive, intentional displays of human remains.<sup>250</sup> These essential questions should include, Who is affected by the way this science is portrayed? Have we consulted with the people represented by this narrative? What is the intention and purpose behind these exhibits, and what is ultimately being conveyed to the viewer?

247. Jodi Simkin, telephone interview with author, Jan. 13, 2020.

248. Zeresenay Alemseged, interview with the author, Nov. 13, 2019.

249. Jenkins, 62.

250. Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

## Summary

Museum exhibits, whether they educate, titillate, entertain, or provoke, reflect a culture’s understanding of what is worthy of display within a given period in time. The politics, science, and ethics of museum displays are a microcosm of a society’s biases, influences, and authority. They disseminate what is seen as truth, which ideas are groundbreaking, and whose perspectives are given weight. The Field Museum is a single locus in an international network of anthropological collections and displays. This analysis of the Field’s historical trajectory reveals how museum narratives are constructed, challenged, and changed.

The rhetorical argument, “how would you feel if *your* grandmother’s grave were opened” and her remains put on display, presented by Cheyenne spiritual leader Bill Tall Bull to the US Senate, holds less sway when the person in question is not anyone’s grandmother, but a very distant ancestor.<sup>251</sup> Cultural differences also color whether one perceives ancestry to human remains on display. The controversy of Kennewick Man, for example, reveals the perception of ancestry as a cultural, and sometimes individual, sentiment.<sup>252</sup> The Umatilla people’s claim to the Kennewick Man is based on their spiritual connection to their ancestors, a belief not shared by the scientific community. At the same time, Egyptian or Peruvian mummies, which are not as old as Kennewick Man, remain on display for nationalistic or commercial reasons.<sup>253</sup>

251. Stan Hoig, Paul Rosier, and Ada Elizabeth Deer, *The Cheyenne* (New York: Infobase, 2009), 100.

252. Rasmussen, 455–58.

253. Native Americans, visiting the Field Museum to repatriate their ancestors, had no qualms about seeing Egyptian mummies on display. Helen Robbins, interview with the author, Nov. 22, 2019.

For some, emotional gravity diminishes when viewing the fossil of a hominin that lived millions of years ago. Newer, more philosophical methods of displaying human remains seek to expand how visitors relate to ancestors who lived in deep time. John Gurche, whose work is featured at the Field Museum, makes three-dimensional reconstructions of hominins and believes the distinction we draw between “human” and “non-human” species when thinking of early hominin ancestors is artificially; these ancestors are “gradually becoming human.”<sup>254</sup> He notes the “irony” that, while early anthropological displays objectified the bones of more recently deceased humans, his work seeks to *personify* the bones of prehistoric hominins and to imbue the bones of protohumans with something that is, if not distinctly human, *beingness*.<sup>255</sup> He uses biomechanical and anatomical knowledge to bring to life a being that is not simply a “fantasy,” as it would be if he were to make an artistic representation without scientific accuracy.<sup>256</sup> In parallel to the collectors who felt a responsibility to collect remains before, they feared, tribes would go extinct, Gurche feels a responsibility through his artwork to preserve the fossils of prehistoric hominins for the future: “We’re not necessarily going to find another Lucy in the next generation.”<sup>257</sup> But perhaps unlike collectors who sought institutional ownership of remains, Gurche believes that they belong conceptually to all humanity. Although museums may be most qualified to maintain physical stewardship of these fossilized bones, paleoart encourages the viewer to relate to the exhibited individuals as living breathing beings and to share the stewardship that comes with that relationship.

254. John Gurche, telephone interview with the author, Jan. 11, 2020.

255. Ibid.

256. Ibid.

257. Ibid.

This thesis asks what it means to own a body and what it means to lay claim to one’s ancestors. It examines how the attempt to pin down “what is a human” is part of an ever-changing narrative. Museum displays of human remains reveal the history of how individuals, cultural groups, institutions, and governments vie for authority to present, construct, and define what it means to be human. The ways the dead are displayed reflect on both the viewers and the institution, as well as their place in both the past, the present, and the future world. How viewers relate to the dead—as an ancestor or their heritage—situates their lives in relation to time and space. How an institution displays the dead—as scientific specimen or cultural being—has the power to promote and shape future worldviews. ○



## Appendix: Interviews

The University of Chicago Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board approved my study outline and proposed interview questions (IRB19-1623). I interviewed nine subjects with divergent viewpoints surrounding repatriation, museum displays, exhibitions, curatorial practices, and bioanthropological research.<sup>258</sup> I contacted interviewees via email, offered them their choice of interview format (email, in-person, etc.), and sent them IRB-approved questions tailored to each subject prior to the interview. Questions involved (1) professional roles and responsibilities; (2) interactions with displays of human remains; and (3) philosophical concerns, such as, “From your perspective, who owns a dead body?”; “At what point should a hominin, or early human primate ancestor, be considered human?”; and “Do you think that the field of archaeology is making progress in displaying the human body?” I intended interviews to last a half hour, but they often continued for over an hour. I recorded and transcribed interviews and kept email correspondence.

258. I was unfortunately unable to include the perspective of an indigenous person who had successfully sought repatriation from the Field Museum due to the sensitivity of such an inquiry and a thesis deadline. I will include such a perspective should I expand the thesis in the future. I do include published perspectives of repatriation activists in different historical eras and in relation to different institutions.

**Zeresenay Alemseged**, Donald N. Pritzker Professor of Organismal Biology and Anatomy, University of Chicago, interview, Nov. 13, 2019

**Élisabeth Daynès**, paleoartist, email, Mar. 9, 2020

**John Gurche**, paleoartist, telephone interview, Jan. 11, 2020

**Janet Hong**, project manager for exhibitions, Field Museum of Natural History, video conference, Dec. 24, 2019

**María Cecilia Lozada**, Peruvian bioarchaeologist and codirector of the Spanish language program, Romance Languages and Literatures, University of Chicago, interview, Nov. 6, 2019

**Robert Martin**, curator emeritus, Negaunee Integrative Research Center, Field Museum of Natural History, email, Feb. 7, 2020

**Samuel J. Redman**, associate professor of history, University of Massachusetts Amherst, video conference, Jan. 8, 2020

**Helen Robbins**, repatriations director, Field Museum of Natural History, interview, Nov. 22, 2019

**Jodi Simkin**, director of cultural affairs and heritage, Klahoose First Nation, telephone interview, Jan. 13, 2020

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