

## Introduction

This book deals with two distinct but related topics: (1) the value of the study of human remains, and associated cultural remains, and the contributions that they make to our understanding of human history and prehistory; and (2) an ideology that opposes such study, threatens such study, and yet has become established in the laws of the United States. Our critique of the ideology cannot be understood except in the context of describing and elucidating the value of the study itself.

We begin with the definition of anthropology that was the dominant understanding in the nineteenth century and twentieth century. Anthropology is the comparative study of human biological and cultural differences and changes through time. Its most important characteristic is its comparative perspective, in which biological and cultural information from all races, ethnic groups, civilizations, and parts of the world is considered, compared, and explained.<sup>1</sup> It was the traditional belief of anthropologists, with which we agree, that it is possible to do these sorts of studies within a comparative, objective, and rigorous framework. We recognize the important differences among the various branches of anthropology, and we also realize that no branch of anthropology can hope to achieve the quantification and rigor of the experimental sciences. Indeed, some cultural anthropologists insist they are not scientific and have no wish to be. Even within these limits, however, traditional anthropologists believed that they could produce an objective and universally valid body of knowledge, which is a perspective that we share. Physical or biological anthropology is a member of the biological sciences group of disciplines. It uses a biological methodology to study one particular species, but it also combines the biological perspective with studies of cultural phenomena, such as diet, patterns of exercise, warfare, and industrial pursuits, that leave their traces on the

bones. Archaeology, by contrast, has some of the perspectives of both a social science and a natural science. Insofar as it is a social science, it attempts to reconstruct the cultural systems of societies that no longer exist, which can even include studies of such apparently intractable materials as belief, ideology, and ritual (Hall 1997). At the same time, archaeology partakes of the methods of the natural sciences. Archaeology is, from this perspective, the study of how remains of human beings, both cultural and biological, are deposited, preserved, and modified on and under the surface of the ground. It is the study of the processes that produce the physical evidence of human activities (Binford 1983).

Anthropology appeared as a distinct discipline in the nineteenth century and flourished in the twentieth century. As part of that flourishing, there were established museums of anthropology or, more commonly, of natural history, that served as repositories for human biological and cultural remains. These museums, often associated with colleges and universities, dedicated themselves to the collection, conservation, preservation, study, and display of human biological and cultural remains. Collections of human remains, whether from Native Americans or others, enabled anthropologists to study human variation, which set the foundation for modern bioarchaeology (the study of human remains in archaeological settings), osteology (the study of bones), and forensic anthropology (the study of human remains in legal settings).<sup>2</sup> In the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, anthropologists started to examine disease origins, frequency, and distribution. For instance, Hermann Welcker published *cribra orbitalia* (an indicator of anemia) rates and distribution in 1888 (Angel 1981). Then, as early as 1917, studies on skeletal collections enabled anthropologists to start understanding the effects of activity patterns on bones. Early studies have helped create a basis for determining ethnicity, age, and sex from bones in ways that still help forensic anthropologists (Weiss 2009). These collections were traditionally regarded as an essential part of anthropology itself and continue to be essential to anthropological studies today.

Beginning in the late twentieth century there appeared a series of challenges to the perspectives just summarized. The first was the postmodernist movement, which attacked all supposedly objective knowledge and objective theorizing as, in fact, a fraud. To the postmodernists, what was supposed to be objective science and scholarship was, in fact, an expression of the ideology of the dominant classes or subcultures. Science itself was

simply an expression of capitalism, imperialism, and racism. For example, 2014 Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Suzan Harjo, an American Indian activist who started the Morning Star Institute (which holds an annual prayer day for sacred lands) in 1984, has stated that studying Native American remains “comes down to racism” (Muska 1998, n.p.). However, anthropologists study remains from all peoples, which led the late Philip Walker (2000), who worked collaboratively with Native Americans for decades, to suggest that to exclude Native American bones from research could also be viewed as racist. As such, anthropology—according to Native American activists—had no claim to superior knowledge over the knowledge held or claimed by any group of people. In particular, any group that could be thought of as marginalized or exploited should have its version of knowledge given great credence simply because of the source of that knowledge.

The above led very quickly to the appearance of putative spokespeople for American Indians who applied the postmodern perspective to anthropology. According to them, anthropology, like science generally, was a fraud. For instance, James Riding In has compared archaeologists to criminals and Satan worshippers while Devon Mihesuah has equated archaeological excavations to illegal ransacking of burials (Watkins 2005) and simply a way in which the dominant culture exploited the subordinate culture. The subordinate culture was conceived of as victimized, not only in the past but in the present. Therefore, the perspectives of the oppressed groups should be given special credence and deference to make up for being suppressed in the past (Mihesuah 2000; Fine-Dare 2002). Yet Native Americans had previously assisted in excavations with bioarchaeologists and archaeologists. Walker (2000) reported on his own experiences in the late 1960s in which the Inuit were not concerned with excavations or reburial of remains that were being preserved for study. Other anthropologists have supported this historical perspective that Native Americans engaged in archaeology before the activist period began, and they did not seem to be bothered with the excavation of remains or concerned about the possibility of skeletal remains staying unburied (Ubelaker and Grant 1989). Arguably, this suggests that the current Native American view that remains should be reburied is a modern, political construct and not a genuine reflection of historical Native American cultural beliefs. Chapter 9 discusses prehistoric and historic evidence for varied treatment of human remains by Native Americans.

This ideology of victimization as a justification for preferring certain

views over others led to the view that American Indians own their own culture, including their own past, their own bodies, and their own artifacts. Their racial and ethnic identities give them an authority and a right to pronounce on truth that other groups do not have. As quoted in the *New York Times*, Clement Meighan lamented the legal stance that “Indians have revealed wisdom that is not to be challenged, not to be questioned, or investigated” (Johnson 1996, n.p.). Other Native American views include those reported by Suzianne Painter-Thorne (2001) in which she noted that Native Americans feel that they need to correct the errors that archaeologists made in their narratives. From many Native American perspectives, Painter-Thorne (2001) states, their narrative is the only right way to present the past; it must be in their own voices. Regarding the Native American narratives, “elders are credited with powers of memory credible far beyond anything that would be granted to anyone else” (Mason 2000, 256). Incredibly, at the National Museum of the American Indian, which is a part of the Smithsonian Institution, former director W. Richard West Jr. proposed that the museum would be run for and by Native Americans. His revised mission statement included that only Native Americans (or those committed to the Nativist agenda) could understand Native American culture and history (Brundin 1996). One can only imagine the righteous indignation that would arise if any other people—for example, the English—stated that only they could study or truly understand English culture and history. Former program administrator Rick Hill added that if Native Americans do not take responsibility for the work, “the white people will win” (Brundin 1996, 36). Fortunately, the National Museum of the American Indian seems to have backed down from some of these extreme views. Some versions of this view that the American Indian voice is the only voice of authority on Native American topics led to an extraordinarily broad definition and understanding of property as enjoyed by American Indians. It includes not only physical objects but knowledge of all sorts that related to American Indians and terminology derived from Indian languages or Indian names even though they had entered the mainstream culture centuries before (Newton 2012, 993–1318).

This then led to the conclusion that secular and scientific scholarship concerning human cultural and biological differences should be replaced by, or should at least defer to, traditional American Indian animistic religions in terms of who has authority to speak. This view was often put forward in its most literal form, in which miraculous events and interven-