



2014

Archiving anthropos: Tracking the ethics of collections across history and anthropology

Ann M. Kakaliouras

Joanna Radin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://poetcommons.whittier.edu/anth>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

FROM THE GUEST EDITORS

Archiving *Anthropos*: Tracking the Ethics of Collections across History and Anthropology

ANN M. KAKALIOURAS AND JOANNA RADIN

In this special issue of *Curator: The Museum Journal* we have invited scholars in history and anthropology to contribute papers focusing on ethical issues that arise in using and contemplating anthropological collections and practices of collecting, past and present. The aim is to demonstrate that *what* was collected (and sometimes *how* it was collected) has consequences for shaping scientific and ethical claims made by academics, museum workers, and descendant communities. The values and norms of past collectors are not automatically transmitted into the present. Our ideas about the appropriate use, display, and disposition of these collections are being transformed by new circumstances. Both the creation and the continuing existence of collections in some museums and academic institutions have been fraught with controversy, as the repatriation movement as shown us.

We employ *anthropos*—the Greek word for “man” or more generally, “human”—in the title, because we are interested in how anthropologists have sought to assemble collections in the service of understanding what it is to be human, itself a historically unstable phenomenon. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century collecting, what resulted was less a material archive of humanity in general, and more a disproportionate representation of the ancestors and heritages of colonized and subjugated peoples.

Together, the papers in this issue consider how the existence and deployment of these sorts of collections have figured into the history and practices of anthropology. In other words, how did collections shape the questions anthropologists asked? Or the avenues of inquiry anthropologists chose to pursue? Or the sorts of knowledge that became valuable to anthropologists, as well as to the publics served by anthropology? What of those who were simultaneously collected and excluded from the interpretations of their own cultures and histories?

Collecting continues today in anthropology. It may take the form of sociocultural anthropologists recording conversations; archaeologists and physical anthropologists excavating habitation sites and burials; ecological anthropologists measuring body types in different environments; or geneticists collecting blood samples. What can we learn from attending to the practices of anthropological collecting and the knotty ethical issues that currently arise in the discipline? Addressing the ethical dimensions of anthropological practices involving collections will have consequences for gathering, keeping, and stewardship of information or materials on the museum shelf, in the historical archive or in the genetic database.

Looking at practices of collecting and collections management has meant, for many of us,

Ann M. Kakaliouras (akakalio@whittier.edu), associate professor, Anthropology, Whittier College, Whittier, California. Joanna Radin (joanna.radin@yale.edu), assistant professor, History of Science and Medicine, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut; she also has affiliations with the departments of Anthropology and History.

paying attention to the objects of anthropological desire (such as bones, artifacts, measurements, and recordings of songs and stories). It has meant examining the field notes, correspondence, and other forms of documentation (or lack thereof) that have discursively created concepts about a collection's use or importance at a particular time and place. Such materials allow us to ask questions about how that initial value has changed over time.

One of the key themes that emerged in this series of papers is how collections and collecting practices have brought ideas about peoples and places into being. Margaret Bruchac carefully recovers Kwakwaka'wakw women's cultural knowledge from the written dialogue between Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, and one of his central informants, George Hunt. The field of anthropology came to know of the Indigenous people of the Northwest Coast primarily through the long-distance collaboration between Boas and Hunt. Yet Hunt relied on cultural information he acquired through his Indigenous wives and their female relatives.

Robert Kett shows how scientific conceptions of the ancient Olmec of Southern Mexico and the landscape around them were created through the work of archaeologists who romanticized as they excavated monumental sites, and ornithologists who collected scores of birds—as well as through the discourse among these different groups of scientists. Kett contends that these distinctive “epistemological ecologies” need our attention if we are to understand the histories of collections and the meanings that have been produced from them.

Lydia Pyne contributes to the notion of collections having affect, through her examination of the Klasies River Mouth caves in South Africa, the site of numerous excavations that have uncovered early human fossils and have stimulated philosophical and technical contro-

versies about the nature of the physical evidence. She refers us to twentieth-century philosopher Ernst Cassirer and his approach to regarding collections as “*Objekts*” with epistemic identities.

Bruchac, Kett, and Pyne show us that collections are interpretively powerful, but also partial and fragmented. Knowledge produced from collections is deeply reflective of “official” or accepted perceptions of faraway peoples and places. Often, little room for alternative narratives remains when collections gain meaning through seemingly authoritative descriptions and interpretations.

New interpretations and re-examinations of old collections may expose further ethical and practical problems. Desirée Martinez, Wendy Teeter, and Karimah Kennedy suggest how archaeological practices intertwined with Native practices and perspectives have created new ethical contexts for collections of human remains, which are simultaneously Indigenous ancestors. Focusing on the work of the Pimu Catalina Island Archaeology Project (PCIAP), and the history of collecting on Catalina Island (off the coast of Southern California), they tackle the challenges of finding appropriate people and places for the repatriation of human skeletal remains in accordance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). They expose the deficits in the collection they examine in depth: unknown proveniences (original locations); fragmentary records; and careless handling.

Ann M. Kakaliouras takes a philosophical look at repatriation, the loss of collections, and what this all means for physical anthropology, as she surveys how bioarchaeologists and skeletal biologists have responded to NAGPRA and the idea of repatriation in general. She explores related issues from the perspective of physical anthropology, asking scientists to reimagine their previous relationships with and approaches

to human remains that have been repatriated. Kakaliouras suggests that physical anthropology “as usual” may no longer be an appropriate approach to engaging with human remains in the milieu that repatriation has created.

Catherine A. Nichols examines the practice of exchanging anthropological objects—as museums did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—by tracing the biography of a Hopi sacred object (collected by the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1879) from the Smithsonian Institution to the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris in 1885. Nichols enumerates the consequences of these transfers, which created problems for research, for potential repatriation claims, and for the loss of information and disruption of catalogues. This history has been a limiting factor in similar exchanges today.

Heather Edgar and Anna Rautman, in their narrative of the policies of the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico, tackle the problems generated by new examinations and contexts for old collections. The Maxwell Museum maintains its historical policy of accepting new collections. The authors describe a case in which material remains from a roadside attraction came to be housed at the museum. The intricacies and costs of navigating the NAGPRA process for such a collection underscore the complexities and pressures that state and federal law have placed on the few museums that are willing to curate such collections.

While new interpretative lives for old collections have obviously strained existing ethical frameworks, new technologies promise more complications. Among other concerns, they have permitted new categories of materials to be collected and preserved. Joanna Radin explains that the development of cold storage technologies in the mid-twentieth century inaugurated a

new “salvage era” in anthropology. Instead of bones and artifacts, the desired material became blood, which could now be kept indefinitely in freezers. The unique or isolated blood profiles from Indigenous people began to be collected in ways similar to how bones and artifacts were collected in the nineteenth century. Radin follows the career of biological anthropologist Jonathan Friedlander—essentially archiving the anthropologist—by chronicling his involvement in blood collection, research, and ethical controversies around his activities. Her examination of his and her own “collection” activities (of his personal archive of papers) situates ethics at the center of any scholar’s knowledge practices.

As Trudy Turner reminds us: “Scientists are collectors.” She shows us that the existence and long-term curating of DNA samples from millions of people demonstrates that scientific collecting is perhaps just ramping up in the twenty-first century. Turner outlines the legal and political landmarks in both collecting and ethical practices that have informed the last few decades of research in biological anthropology. There is the prospect that biobanks—which house blood and tissue samples of humans and animals—will only grow in number and scientific relevance. The future may well demand more attention to informed consent, as well as agreements between researchers, communities, and countries—issues that will govern the future of collection practices and curating itself.

We hope the contributions to this special issue of *Curator: The Museum Journal* will generate discussion and reflection, not just about anthropological collecting and collections, but also about the ethics of collecting as a scholarly enterprise. These papers make clear that each collection has its own complicated life story and politics, which are inextricable from its ability to tell us something about what it means to be human. Whether a collection is material or

ephemeral, whole or fragmented, in a file folder, a freezer, or on a DVD, the activity of collecting itself implies that something is transferred from an original location to a new context, and then put to new uses. Therefore, those who control, deploy, or make meaning from collections need to acknowledge that the descendants of those who were collected are now a part of this enterprise. The increasing participation of multiple stakeholders in work that is done with collections also means that scientists, in particular, should not—and in many cases cannot—collect, investigate, collaborate, and publish in isolation from the histories of and publics involved in the collections they study. This development is not a weakening of the scientific enterprise. Rather, as the papers in this issue demonstrate, it reflects the movement toward a more honest recognition of the complex social relationships and continually emerging politics of exchange that have always been a part of science. **END**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has been dependent upon materials with enduring connections to a broad range of descendant communities. Our hope is that these papers will stimulate conversations in which all of those invested in the care of these collections may have a voice. We would also like to heartily thank the anonymous reviewers for all their helpful comments. Finally, we are grateful to all of the contributors for their patience, hard work, and insightful articles.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

Margaret M. Bruchac (Abenaki) wears many hats (literally and figuratively). During graduate study at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, she performed living history at Old Sturbridge Village Museum. From 2003–2009, she served as the Five College Repatriation Research Liaison for Amherst College; from 2009–2012, she was Coordinator of Native

American Studies at the University of Connecticut. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Coordinator of the Native American Studies Initiative at the University of Pennsylvania. Her recent research investigates the social negotiations, patterns of circulation, and modes of representation that shape museological understandings of wampum as contested Indigenous cultural heritage.

Heather J.H. Edgar received her B.A. from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas; M.A. from Arizona State University; and Ph.D. from Ohio State University. All of her training has been in biological anthropology, with an emphasis on bioarchaeology. Most of her research focuses on understanding how cultural and historical events and trends shape biological variation in populations, especially in North America. As Curator of Human Osteology for the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico (UNM), she is responsible for pre-contact, historic, and contemporary human skeletal collections. She also serves as Assistant Professor of Anthropology at UNM.

Ann M. Kakaliouras was initially trained in human skeletal biology and paleopathology as an undergraduate at Hamline University, in St. Paul, Minnesota. As an assistant at Hamline's Osteology Laboratory from 1991–1995 she helped prepare Indian ancestors for repatriation and participated in reburials. She went on to graduate school in bioarchaeology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, but maintained her interest in repatriation and NAGPRA. Her current research focuses on the history of twentieth-century encounters between physical anthropologists and Native American people. She is currently an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Whittier College, in Whittier, California.

Robert J. Kett is a doctoral candidate in cultural anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. His dissertation draws on anthropology, art history, and science studies to examine histories of artistic and scientific practice in southern Mexico and their connection to the dramatic development of the region in the twentieth-century. In addition to his dissertation research, he has curated a number of exhibitions and is co-editor of *Learning by Doing at the Farm: Craft, Science, and Counterculture in Modern California* (2014, SoberSCOPE Press).

Desiré René Martínez has dedicated her life to obtaining skills and knowledge to combat the wanton destruction of Native American sacred and cultural sites, especially those of her community, the Gabrieliño (Tongva). She received her B.A. in Anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania and her M.A. in Anthropology from Harvard University. She is a co-director of the Pimu Catalina Island Archaeological Field School, a native-centered course that melds archaeology with traditional knowledge in collaboration with the Gabrieliño (Tongva) community. She currently works as an archaeologist for Cogstone Resource Management.

Catherine A. Nichols is trained in cultural and museum anthropology. As an undergraduate she participated in Northwestern University's Ethnographic Field School on the Navajo Nation, which resulted in an ethnography of the relationship between museum collections and Navajo identity. During the course of her M.A. and Ph.D. training she curated exhibitions for Arizona State University Museum of Anthropology. Her doctoral work examines the history of American anthropology in museums, and historical practices of collections management, particularly the practice of specimen exchange by the Smithsonian Institution. She has accepted a position at Loyola University Chicago as Lecturer in Cultural Anthropology and Museum Studies.

Lydia Pyne was trained as both an archaeologist and a historian of science, focusing on the history of paleoanthropology and archaeology. Her fieldwork, archival research, and writing projects have ranged from South Africa, Ethiopia, Uzbekistan, and Iran, to the American Southwest. She works as a freelance writer and as a research associate for the University of Texas at Austin, Institute for Historical Studies.

Anna L.M. Rautman received her B.S. and M.S. from the University of New Mexico, where she is currently working on her Ph.D. in evolutionary anthropology. She has been an assistant in the Laboratory of Human Osteology, Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, for eight years. Her research interests concern the tradeoffs between growth and development and other life history variables in different body systems.

Karimah Kennedy Richardson is a co-director for the Pimu Catalina Archaeological Project. She is

currently the staff archaeologist for the Southwest Museum of American Indian Collection at the Autry National Center. Additionally she is currently a graduate student at the University of California, Riverside focusing in Biological Anthropology. Before joining the Autry she worked for eight years in cultural resource management. She also participated in an osteological internship for two summers at the National Archaeology Museum of Lisbon analyzing Roman human remains.

Joanna Radin combines methods from history and anthropology to study knowledge production in the life and human sciences. She is at work on a book, based on her dissertation, that examines the ideas and practices that led an international network of human biologists to collect and freeze blood samples from a range of Indigenous communities at the dawn of our contemporary genomic age. She is an Assistant Professor of History of Science and Medicine at Yale University, where she also has affiliations with the departments of History and Anthropology.

Wendy Giddens Teeter is Curator of Archaeology, Fowler Museum at UCLA and the UCLA NAG-PRA Coordinator since 1998. She co-directs the Pimu Catalina Island Archaeology Project. She is part of several boards and committees, including the Committee on Museums, Collections and Curation, Society for American Archaeology. She teaches, publishes, and lectures about prehistoric archaeology, curating and cultural heritage preservation in California through the UCLA American Indian Studies and in the Department of Anthropology at California State University, Northridge.

Trudy Turner has been studying the life history and genetics of vervet monkeys, a geographically wide-spread species of primate, for over 30 years. She received her B.A. from Northwestern University, Ph.D. from New York University, and did a postdoctoral fellowship in genetics at the University of Michigan. Her work has taken her to seven African countries and two islands in the Caribbean. Trudy is currently Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, an affiliated faculty member in the Department of Genetics, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa, and editor of the *Yearbook of Physical Anthropology*. **END**