

Some Indigenous Perspectives on Artifact Collecting and Archaeologist–Collector Collaboration

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AAP Thematic-Issue Editors

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to bring Indigenous voices into the ongoing conversation about collecting practices and the archaeological record. The issue editors solicited responses to open-ended questions about those subjects from members of their own and issue contributors' networks of Indigenous collaborators and contacts. Alan D. Kelley (Deputy Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska), Angela J. Neller (Curator, Wanapum Heritage Center, Washington), and Carlton Shield Chief Gover (PhD student in archaeology at the University of Colorado and member of the Skiri Band of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma) offered the answers reported here. We do not pretend to reflect the innumerable and highly varied Indigenous perspectives on the collection of their ancestors' material culture, but we do hope to plant the seeds of a more inclusive conversation than has been the norm in archaeology.

Keywords: Indigenous perspectives on material culture, artifact collecting, archaeologist–collector collaboration

Este artículo intenta traer las voces indígenas a las conversaciones en curso sobre las prácticas de coleccionismo y el registro arqueológico. Los editores de la edición solicitaron respuestas a preguntas abiertas sobre estos temas a los miembros de sus propias redes y las de los colaboradores, y contactos indígenas de los contribuyentes a este número. Alan D. Kelley (Oficial Adjunto de Preservación Histórica Tribal, Tribu Iowa de Kansas y Nebraska), Angela J. Neller (conservadora, Wanapum Heritage Center, Washington) y Carlton Shield Chief Gover (estudiante de doctorado en arqueología de la Universidad de Colorado y miembro de Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma) ofrecieron las respuestas que se informan aquí. No pretendemos reflejar las innumerables y muy variadas perspectivas indígenas acerca del coleccionismo de la cultura material de sus antepasados, pero sí esperamos plantar las semillas de una conversación más inclusiva de lo que ha sido la norma en la arqueología.

Palabras clave: perspectivas indígenas sobre la cultura material, coleccionismo de artefactos, colaboración arqueólogo–coleccionista

Issue Editors (IE): Indigenous ancestors produced much of the American archaeological record. Archaeologists and private artifact collectors have done significant damage to that record through the removal of materials for scientific investigation, satisfaction of personal curiosity, or financial gain. By erasing the physical remains of the widespread and chronologically deep Indigenous presence from landscapes, artifact collection has had the insidious effect of obscuring Indigenous heritage. Careful documentation, recording, and research can help mitigate this loss, but archaeologists must acknowledge the harm done not just by private collectors but by generations of their own collecting practices.

This fraught history complicates collaboration and communication among collectors, archaeologists, and tribes. The articles in this issue of *Advances in Archaeological Practice* represent a broad

sampling of archaeologist–collector collaborative research projects in various stages of completion and with differing levels of Indigenous engagement. Most of the case studies engage Indigenous people through consultation with Tribal Historic Preservation Offices and/or advisory boards at tribal government levels. Others include Indigenous individuals engaged with the archaeological record through collecting, education, and other stakeholder roles. Although all the case studies meet and sometimes exceed legal and ethical requirements for tribal consultation, they do not elevate and engage Indigenous voices in the broader conversation about practice and collector impacts on the archaeological record.

To begin to do this, we drafted four questions to solicit the thoughts of Indigenous colleagues and acquaintances of the

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contributors to this volume. Contributors shared the questions with members of their respective networks, adding context as they saw fit and stressing that responses could be of any length and could address one or more of the following questions:

- How do you view your relationship to artifacts and the archaeological record?
- Have you worked with private collections and collectors, and what was your experience?
- What do you want archaeologists and collectors to know to move collaborative practice forward?
- Is there anything else you think we should know?

Coauthors Alan Kelley, Angela Neller, and Carlton Shield Chief Gover responded to those inquiries, and the remainder of this article reports their responses, altering them only to cluster answers according to the prompts. What follows is not intended to suggest a singular Indigenous view or perspective on material culture, its collection, or collaboration among those interested in it. Rather, we hope to inspire a broader conversation about the diverse relationships people have with the material record of the past, and how those intersect, conflict, and can perhaps be reconciled.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Alan D. Kelley (ADK): I am the Deputy Tribal Historic Preservation Officer of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska and have held positions within the tribe, including executive vice chairman, surveillance tech, IT director, and gaming commissioner. I was formerly a member of the Kansas Water Office and Missouri Regional Advisory Committee. I sit on the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee and Tribal Interests Work Group, a 70-member committee that provides recommendations on current and future activities of the Missouri River Recovery Project. I also was a board member of the Public Wholesale Water Supply District No. 27 and am a Loess Hills master naturalist. Additionally, I am part of the Kansas Indian Nations Drought Vulnerability and Resiliency Assessment. That is a three-phase project that aims to establish an inventory of Tribal environmental resources that are impacted by drought, characterize local water resources, and develop a drought/climate early warning system for long- and short-term planning and decision making at local and regional levels. The work involves coordination and cooperation among all four tribes in Kansas; educational institutions, such as Haskell University and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (National Drought Mitigation Center and the High Plains Regional Climate Center); and federal and state partners, such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Integrated Drought Information System, and the Kansas Water Office.

Angela J. Neller (AJN): I am a Kanaka ʻŌiwi (Native Hawaiian) scholar with 30 years of experience managing cultural collections. I hold a master of arts in anthropology from the University of Illinois. As curator for the Wanapum Heritage Center, I oversee archaeological, ethnographic, and archival collections affiliated with the Wanapum Band of Priest Rapids. I am in a unique position as curator: I support the Wanapum to care for their material culture and assist in the repatriation of their ancestors through the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, the National Museum of the American Indian Act, and Washington

State’s Burial Law. My publications address curation, repatriation, and the value of curated professional and amateur archaeological collections for regional research. As adjunct faculty for Central Washington University, I teach museum curation and management, and I hope to instill in my students the importance of including descendant communities in their work. One of my most significant achievements was participating in the design and construction of the Wanapum Heritage Center, which opened in 2015. As a Kanaka ʻŌiwi museum professional, I feel a kinship with the Wanapum in the way that they view the importance of their museum to their identity and community. The Wanapum Heritage Center is a place where the rights of an Indigenous people are actively pursued through programs that educate, revitalize, protect, and give voice to spiritual and religious responsibilities.

Carlton Shield Chief Gover (CSCG): I am a PhD student in anthropology at the University of Colorado Boulder. I also belong to the Skiri Band of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma. I received my MA from the University of Wyoming and my BS from Radford University. I have done archaeological fieldwork in Virginia, Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska, and across Ukraine. My research is primarily focused on answering qualitative questions using quantitative methods through an Indigenous and collaborative anthropological approach. Using Indigenous oral traditions from the Pawnee, Arikara, and Wichita, I use the radiocarbon record from the Central Plains to date events distinguished in oral traditions and to identify periods of ethnogenesis and migration.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

IE: *How do you view your relationship to artifacts and the archaeological record?*

ADK: Artifacts and the archaeological record are very important to me and my tribe in tracing our history and especially being able to link our presence to specific locations and not just general areas. Knowing our ancestral connections is part of my role in the tribe and a responsibility I take seriously. I need archaeological information to help protect what is important to my tribe. More and better [archaeological] information is necessary.

AJN: I feel an affinity with Wanapum leaders in regard to the importance of the collections to the Wanapum. I felt the same about Hawaiian material culture to my own identity as a Native Hawaiian. Cultural objects are touchstones to the past, embedded with knowledge, that provide connections to descendant communities. Archaeological sites are also places that connect the present living communities to their ancestors. In many cases, they are traditional cultural places that have both meaning and a role in the present. Living communities have a responsibility to these places. What I have observed and learned is that Indigenous communities have a responsibility to uphold their place within their homeland, to protect the places and things of their ancestors, and to preserve their culture and traditions so that they can be perpetuated to future generations.

As the curator for the Wanapum Heritage Center, I serve as a liaison providing subject matter expertise in curation to ensure that the repository meets the highest legal, ethical, and professional museum standards. This accords the Wanapum a repository that meets the federal curation guidelines so that they can bring

home archaeological collections from their homeland. It is important to care for not only systematic archaeological collections but also nonsystematic collections from private collectors.

CSCG: My relationship to material culture and the archaeological record is dependent on the culture itself. For instance, when I am working with Pawnee or ancestral Pawnee materials, I feel a close connection to objects and the archaeology. I often wonder if it was an ancestor of mine or distant relative who either created the object or constructed a feature. Even if the archaeology I am working on is not directly associated to Pawnee or other Northern Caddoan speakers, I try to be as diligent and respectful as possible with my excavation and research. I do my best to practice the cultural protocols of other Indigenous cultures when working on their ancestral material culture. However, when I worked in Ukraine, I held a completely different relationship to the LBK and Early Bronze Age sites I was working at because I do not have a familial or cultural relationship to that part of the world. Working there was not as stressful, and I did not have this feeling of doing my absolute best 100% of the time I was working. I did not have that same weight of responsibility that I do when working on Pawnee archaeology. That is not to say that I slacked off, but I actually had fun doing archaeology in Ukraine because I did not have the same pressures that I do working with the Indigenous archaeological record of North America.

IE: *Have you worked with private collections and collectors, and what was your experience?*

ADK: I have worked with private collectors, good and bad. Bad ones are those who collect to sell artifacts on places such as eBay. They just think about money and not people. The good collectors are ones who recognize that what they collect is part of someone's heritage, and they care or at least think about those connections. I have worked with Native people with legitimate interest in their own heritage who collect artifacts as a way of trying to find out more about their ancestors and why the artifact was left behind. I have been to artifact exhibits—shows—where it is all non-Native collectors buying and selling, with money being the driving reason and only (at best) broad-brush provenience ever known or even cared about. This is a loss of important information. I guess my experience has been about 50/50 with good and bad collectors.

AJN: [Much of] the prehistory of the Middle Columbia River resides in private collections, especially in light of the inundation of archaeological sites by hydroelectric dam reservoirs. The majority of material from these sites was recovered by avocational archaeologists decades before professional archaeologists were on the scene. It is those collections that provide a more complete record of the past. I have been privileged to interact with the families of avocational archaeologists as they look to find a place for their parents' or grandparents' collections. In general, we bring these collections home, but we also want to document as much about the collection as we can. Ideally, information in the form of notes, maps, and photos comes with the collection. We record oral histories to learn about the collections as well as the stories of the collectors. We provide access to the collections for research and public education.

IE: *What do you want archaeologists and collectors to know to move collaborative practice forward?*

ADK: Everyone collecting artifacts, whether as an archaeologist or a collector, should treat artifacts with respect as potentially sacred items. Think about why they were left behind. What were the social and political contexts during loss or that caused the artifact to be left behind? Recognize that abandonment of some stuff maybe was not the choice of the people but was forced by circumstances or pressures on them. Remember that these artifacts belonged to someone else from another time and had importance in their lives. It would be better if collectors recorded where they found things but left them alone.

AJN: Not all knowledge comes from archaeology. The land and Indigenous communities are embedded with knowledge. They provide an authentic voice. We need to contextualize those voices in archaeology. We have a duty to honor the rights to place that the Indigenous people have in their homelands, to give their voice primacy in the work that we do, to use our expertise to advocate for places and the Indigenous people of those places. I have seen firsthand how Indigenous communities become marginalized from their own histories; how their concerns are unheeded; how their voices are discounted; and how decisions are made that disregard their rights to maintain, protect, and develop the past, present, and future manifestations of their cultures, including archaeological and historical sites.

We should all be duty bound to listen and learn from Indigenous communities as we undertake the work that we do. Positive benefits stem from prioritizing Indigenous knowledge and perspectives for both our own work and their rights and responsibilities. Archaeology is a tool. We need to indigenize archaeology by infusing it with the local Indigenous perspectives of the communities represented in the work that we do. Indigenous communities are the experts in their histories. They are holders of cultural knowledge. We have a responsibility to support those communities in telling their stories when asked, to contextualize archaeological inquiry within place, and to reveal a more complete history. We need to be active partners and collaborators with Indigenous communities to use archaeology when needed to help identify and protect the resources for those living communities.

CSCG: Descendant communities are full of reasonable, educated, and caring people. Give them the respect they deserve, and you can end up having fruitful relationships with Indigenous Nations. It is a process. Centuries of genocide and ethnocentrism are not going to be wiped away over a single phone call. Be patient and listen to what descendant communities have to say. Find out what they want to know. Collaboration leads to better research practices and more holistic interpretations of the past. My mom always told me growing up, "Treat others the way you would like to be treated." More professional archaeologists and collectors should do that when it comes to working on the non-Euro-American archaeological record.

IE: *Is there anything else you think we should know?*

ADK: I think stronger laws requiring archaeologists and collectors and Tribes to work together more would be good, but I recommend more collaborating whenever possible.

AJN: We need to communicate our goals and intentions in our work. In doing that, we need to also listen and learn. My hope is

that change can be made in our field of work that celebrates the diverse perspectives that Indigenous communities bring to the table. Go into the community when given the opportunity to learn and understand. Respect the history and culture of the Indigenous people whose place you work in. Help raise their voice, and honor their rights to place.

CSCG: Work on all the unstudied objects collecting dust in museum repositories. We, as a discipline, should figure out all the stuff we already have rather than collecting more through our destructive excavation methods.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

IE: Contemporary archaeological best practice requires meaningful collaboration with communities with vested interests in the past and its material record. Both archaeologists *and* collectors have often failed to recognize and engage those communities with the most significant and personal interest in artifacts and the stories they harbor: Indigenous descendants. This can change, but changing requires a commitment to collaborations that elevate the voices of descendants. It also requires a willingness to engage in conversations that can be difficult but that can result in outcomes that improve both stewardship of the archaeological record and relationships among the many different people who care about it.

We end with thoughts offered by coauthor Gover, to whom we posed two follow-up questions: Do you see a distinction between those who collect legally and those who violate antiquities laws? And, for that matter, do you see a distinction between archaeologists and artifact collectors?

CSCG: I do see a distinction, but not between archaeologists and artifact collectors. The distinction I make is in the purpose of the collecting or the researching. Is it for profit or to make a name for oneself? For me, it is all about the purpose of what an archaeologist or collector is doing and who they are doing it for. I could

not care less if someone is *trained* or not. There are a lot of collectors I would work with over some tenured archaeologists because they work *with* and *for* descendant communities rather than for their own personal interests.

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Data Availability Statement

Research for this paper did not generate new archaeological datasets, nor did it require permits of any sort.

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