

Viewpoint: The ‘culture wars’ infection of anthropology and archaeology grows

In 1941, at the height of World War 2, troops stationed on Hoy in the remote Scottish Orkney Islands made a ghoulish discovery. Buried in peat on a lonely, windswept hill was the perfectly preserved body of a young woman, “her long dark hair curling about her shoulders”.

Although the corpse was swiftly reburied, news of the macabre find inevitably spread. Soon groups of young soldiers, eager for distraction from the boredom of a distant posting, began making “repeated excursions to the gravesite to exhume and view the remains” of the beautiful and mysterious ‘Lady of Hoy’. This morbid entertainment only ended when senior officers were told about the discovery and ordered the by-now decomposing body permanently interned under a concrete slab.

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Who was the Lady of Hoy? In life she’d been [an 18th century Orkney villager, Betty Corrigan](#), whose tragic story is all too sadly familiar. A brief romance with a visiting sailor ended with Betty both pregnant and abandoned. Scorned by her deeply religious community, the distraught girl eventually hanged herself. Her body, that of a sinful suicide, was buried and forgotten in unconsecrated ground far from the scene of her shame. And so it remained for over a century and a half.

Living debates about the dead

Betty Corrigan — the way she was treated both in life and in death — help illuminate an ethical dilemma that has long dogged anthropology and archaeology: how best to deal with human remains and beliefs about the dead, most especially those from times and cultures very different from our own.

This issue has become increasingly acute given the recent rapid advances in ancient DNA analysis of human remains. For those eager to embrace this emerging field, these new technologies offer hope of greater insights into human prehistory and migration, and for valuable knowledge of past human health and disease.

Yet, for others, mindful of the disrespect and desecration of Indigenous burial sites in the past, exploring the genetics of the dead is a “[vampire science](#)” with the potential to bring with it “[harmful social and political consequences](#)”. Such [purported harms](#) include undermining Indigenous land claims, dismissing or disparaging traditional beliefs and oral histories, and potentially “reveal[ing] stigmatizing information like genetic susceptibility to disease”.

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The ‘wars of ideology’ extend to archaeology and anthropology

The spread of the wider political Culture Wars into this debate is evident in a recent controversy over the [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act](#)

. Passed in 1990, NAGPRA sets out guidelines for the physical return of cultural items to Indian Tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations. It also provides a process for the handling of new discoveries of Native American human remains and ancient sacred objects.

Some archaeologists, anthropologists and think tanks have expressed [concerns about 'legislation creep'](#), saying that the original act is being misread and inappropriately expanded, causing conflicts. They say the original legislation was not intended to limit universities to curate and study human remains or objects that are not linearly or culturally linked to a specific indigenous population.

Two prominent anthropologists, Elizabeth Weiss and James Springer, are caught in the crosshairs of this debate. Together they authored a book in 2020, "[Repatriation and Erasing the Past](#)", which has put them in the crosshairs of identity activists. Their 'sin' according to critics is trying to 'recenter' the original legislation, which has expanded over time in its application to cut off access to all remains that are "[culturally unidentifiable](#)" to nearby tribes even if there is no clear connection. That's beyond the original scope of NAGPRA and is dramatically limiting the ability of many scientists to do their science, they say.

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As a consequence of their outspoken defense of their views, Weiss and

Springer have been [attacked](#) as racist colonialists with even a few accusations of white-supremacy. [Anthropologists and researchers](#) from Australasia and North America claimed that the "violent language" of Weiss and Springer's "colonial scholarship" revealed an "explicitly racist ideology", one "that is deeply disrespectful to Indigenous people". They (and others) have called for the [retraction of the Weiss and Springer text](#) and the censoring of their views.

Their attempt to outline their perspective at an already-scheduled talk at the 2021 Society for American Archaeology was summarily cancelled after some colleagues of being "anti-indigenous".

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The SAA's [Queer Archaeology Interest Group \(QAIG\)](#) claimed they were deliberately seeking to “foment tremendous anger and pain among SAA members”; The [Black Trowel Collective](#) argued that the fact that the talk had even been scheduled by SAA was “just one act in a long history, and ongoing present, of racist, misogynistic, and colonial discourse and action.”

In response, Weiss and Springer, whose views have a large following in the science community, claim that if NAGPRA is not returned to its original intent, archaeology would be guilty of “erasing the past” much like Creationists distort the history of evolution. They contend that the “animistic creation myths” of Indigenous peoples are being given priority over the “comparative, objective, and rigorous framework” of traditional anthropology. They've written [academic](#) and [popular articles](#) in response to what they and others see as ‘diversity, equity and inclusion’ over-reach, and bad science.

The two ‘heretics’ have their supporters. Evolutionary biologists Jerry Coyne and Luana Maroja cite this anthropological brouhaha as an example of the “[ideological subversion of biology](#)”. In their [recent article](#) in *Skeptical Inquirer*, Coyne and Maroja analyze what they see as the increasing politicization of science, and the resultant “ideologically driven distortions of biology” to favor fashionable “progressive” causes.

Weiss in particular is (or has been) a globally respected physical anthropologist at San Jose State University, who studies 500-3,000 year old bones from California. What happened when she challenged what she felt is a bizarrely broad ban on studying remains?

For simply studying those remains, Weiss was [demoted by her university and banned from studying her department's collection of bones](#). But it's even worse: she's not allowed to study X-rays of the remains or even show a photograph of the boxes in which they are kept . Many other universities, such as [Berkeley](#)

, are also sending back or reburying artifacts and old bones. The result: valuable human history and anthropology remain off limits because remains and artifacts are considered sacred.

With respect to Indigenous beliefs and human remains, Coyne and Maroja point out the downside of the progressive movement's "desire to valorize oppressed groups" — that it prioritizes religious feelings over empirical facts. "Like biblical creationism," they argue, "much indigenous knowledge ... comes not from evidence but from authority or revelation." The unfortunate result of some broad 'protections' of indigenous artifacts and the like, they suggest, is that "valuable human history and anthropology remain off limits because remains and artifacts are considered sacred." The currently fashionable policy "simply prevents us from learning about our past".

The fact is, no anthropological endeavor is 'bias free'. Charles Darwin, for example, held and expressed views that are clearly racist, sexist and classist — attitudes that influenced later social application of his ideas, such as its transformation into [Social Darwinism](#), eugenics and the like. On the 150th anniversary of Darwin's *Descent of Man* in 2021, the prestigious journal *Science* published an [opinion piece](#) by Princeton University social anthropologist Agustín Fuentes that retroactively pilloried the classic book. Darwin's views, Fuentes argued, "portrayed Indigenous peoples ... as less than Europeans in capacity and behavior ... offering justification of empire and colonialism, and genocide." Employing century and a half year old hindsight, he further claimed Darwin "validated" the odious views of modern "Racists, sexists, and white supremacists".

The resultant outcry in [Darwin's defense](#) was immediate and widespread, with Coyne one of numerous prominent biologists who [strongly condemned](#) the *Science* article's "distorting treatment" of Darwin's "revolutionary" ideas. And so the merry-go-round of acrimonious criticism and counter-criticism continues.

Attitudes about the dead — moral and cultural

To move beyond the stifling polarization of identity-based disputes, we could seek common ground between all parties by underscoring the obvious but crucial point that *all* human cultures possess traditions and customs relating to death and dying. These should be respected and honored. While the specific details may vary widely, the underlying "beliefs about death" and "death rituals" represent [human universals](#) — inherent features of human psychology that exemplify the "[psychic unity of humankind](#)". Many human cultural practices and beliefs — about cooperation, say, or sex or conflict, and death — are shaped by psychological tendencies that channel our thinking or behavior in broadly predictable ways. (The bitter tribalism of the Culture Wars, for example, clearly illuminates humans' evolved tendency to form in-groups and out-groups, with inflammatory rhetoric a way to 'virtue signal' allegiance to one side against the other.)

Or consider 'dualist thinking,' the belief that humans have both a material body and an immaterial 'soul' capable of persisting after bodily death. This innate "[folk psychology of souls](#)" helps explain why concepts of spirits and ghosts are near-universal across cultures, and the ease with which children understand and accept these ideas.

In essence, normal human beings cannot help but feel that 'something' lingers after death — and even avowed materialists (those who, like me, believe that the human mind is simply a product of the physical

body) may still feel that the mistreatment of human remains is somehow irreverent or sacrilegious. Inherent dualist thinking is a psychological default that takes effort to overcome (as too does our inherent tendency towards group tribalism). (Importantly, the objectivity demanded by science does not come naturally to the evolved human mind, with this too requiring effort and experience to master; and while science is ultimately self-correcting, the well-documented intrusion of social biases and prejudice in scientific research demonstrates how readily we revert to inherent ways of thinking.)

How do these cultural contretemps (or wars in some cases) play out in the case of Betty Corrigall's interned body? She was dead (yet preserved), with her body thus both culturally and psychologically 'taboo'. That helps explain both the soldiers' morbid fascination with her corpse and the officers' disapproval of their behavior. (There may also have been a sexual element to the young male troops' interest, also rooted in universal cultural and psychological tendencies.)

What was actually wrong with the soldiers digging up and gawking at Betty Corrigall's body? After all, what made her alive was long gone, not so different from the once-flourishing plants that formed the peat that preserved her. There is a belief that soldiers were callously stirring a vaporous human 'essence' still lingering around poor Betty's body, but what harm, and to whom, did the soldiers' voyeuristic curiosity cause?. It's this intangible but common belief in the scaredness of death that remains part of her and will forever in time

In essence, our evolved psychological tendencies bestow heightened significance on human remains. It may be a myth, especially to agnostic science, but it's a dominant belief nonetheless, and its shadow floats over all graves, which certainly includes displaced and disenfranchised Indigenous people. Given this, it is understandable why the odious history of grave robbing in the name of science is deeply distressing for many, and not just a form of ideological faddism

Anthropologists and geneticists should be more sensitive to this shameful aspect of scientific history and to the psychological distress that 'disrespect' for the dead may cause. Nevertheless, while evolved psychological predispositions may influence cultural beliefs and behaviors concerning the dead, customs and traditions are not necessarily fixed as a result. Those who purport to speak on behalf of these communities have a responsibility of their own to recognize that beliefs about the dead can also evolve over time, even within seemingly 'traditional' cultures, and should always be balanced against other practices, including scientific endeavors that can widely benefit others.

Times they are a-changing

Let's return to the Lady of Hoy. From a modern liberal perspective, Betty's story draws attention to the cruelty of the social attitudes that led to her death. While it is possible that she herself accepted the community beliefs that led to her condemnation and her subsequent suicide, such bigoted views are no longer acceptable in the liberal West. Moral attitudes have changed. The same is true of numerous now out-dated historical customs and behaviors. In her time; for example, the barbaric trans-Atlantic slave trade was still in full flow, as was the heinous practice of [burning female \(though not male\) criminals at the stake](#). Yet no reasonable modern Westerner would call for these 'traditional' institutions to be reinstituted.

Just as Western societies have changed (rapidly and recently), so too have Indigenous cultures. For example, slavery and human sacrifice were practiced in many historical Indigenous cultures, and ritual

cannibalism in others. Today, though, no Indigenous person would defend these practices as appropriate to their modern lives. 'Authentic' traditional culture is, as postmodernists themselves might agree, an elusive concept. Modern Indigenous peoples do not see the world through the eyes of their ancestors, just as modern Westerners no longer share the worldview of their forebears.

Yet the irony is obvious: many self-proclaimed 'protectors' of Indigenous culture who rail against the 'colonization' of the sacred past are themselves imposing idealized and somewhat condescending European notions of the "[noble savage](#)" on Indigenous societies, protecting their remains with no exceptions. Does not intent matter? What if the archaeological excavation offers scientific benefit that serves the greater good or a tribe's yearning to better understand its history? Should excavating DNA be treated the same as extracting skulls or other skeletal remains from burial sites?

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Missionaries and the Noble Savage, Wilhelm Lamprecht

Yes, historically, many (but by no means all) Indigenous cultures venerated their dead and gave obeisance to the spirits of the deceased. But how that was expressed, historically and today, varies dramatically from culture to culture. There is no universal view of how to handle ancient remains. There are no ethical qualms about digging up ancient hominin ancestors such as Neanderthals or excavating skeletons from the [sunken Titanic](#).



Titanic remains at the shipwreck site

Numerous archaeologists have consulted and collaborated with tribes, some of which have allowed the excavation of DNA from their forebears' graves, as the Colville Tribe did in the case of Kennewick Man. Some tribes are honored by knowing more about their ancestors. Blanket prohibitions, formal or implied, and enforced by public shaming of scientists, not only hurts science but steals agency from Indigenous cultures, who have a right to negotiate their own practices.

While past custom can be a guide, any particular response to questions of identity and human remains is only one of several possible modern interpretations of historical tradition; by their very nature, novel problems require novel solutions. An aversion to genetic research into ancient remains is therefore only one of several possible *modern* interpretations of how to protect traditional cultural customs and beliefs that emerged long before such technologies were even possible.

It is similarly belittling to presume that all members of Indigenous communities share uniform perspectives, or that belonging to a particular group implies unanimous opinions and attitudes. Activists, often representing an academic or urban elite, who claim to speak for a specific community may articulate political opinions that do not necessarily mirror the broader range of views within that community. As is often the case, the most vocal voices, especially those willing to stifle opposing viewpoints elsewhere, may drown out the potential diversity of beliefs within a community. In the case of the NAGPRA dispute, for example, the outspoken opinions of certain Indigenous individuals may conceal others' curiosity about what modern genetic science can reveal about their ancestral history.

A (genetic) window into the past

There are other reasons why blocking DNA analysis of ancient remains, while purportedly protecting Indigenous people, can potentially be harmful: it closes off valuable practical, intellectual and cultural knowledge that can help all communities, including vulnerable Indigenous ones.

Greater understanding of health and disease is one of the most obvious practical benefits of inquiry into the genetic ancestry of different populations. In Europe, for example, an ever increasing accumulation of genetic data has shed new light on the history, spread and causes of diseases, including insights into susceptibility and immunity to ancient plagues, and even [Neanderthal genetic links](#) to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Yet given how human genetics research is already massively skewed towards those of European ancestry, this can only get worse for Indigenous peoples if access to ancestral remains is denied. This holds particularly true for Indigenous communities, where specific susceptibilities to certain diseases exist due to the genetic isolation of ancestral populations (as is the case with European Jews, the Amish, Basque Spaniards and numerous other groups isolated by geography or tradition).

Research has already identified numerous disorders found primarily in Native American populations. STAC3 disorder (formerly known as Native American myopathy) is a condition that weakens the muscles that the body uses for movement. Human HOXA1 syndromes are rare disorders with complex neurological and systemic symptoms. The disorder, found among a few American Indian tribes such as the Navajo and Apache's can result in deafness and heart malformations. Restricting access to Indigenous genetic information could hinder our ability to address their unique health challenges effectively.

(And note here that some critics opposed to DNA extraction have raised concerns about potential revelations of "stigmatizing information" related to disease susceptibility if genetic analysis of ancestral remains is allowed. It is as if possible, though not inevitable, stigma is worse than actual disease itself.)

Reviewing the Indigenous rights conflict through the eyes of Orkney

What about the potential intellectual and cultural benefits of increased understanding of Indigenous genetic ancestry? Let's return to Hoy in the Orkney Islands to illustrate this point. In a heather-covered valley, a few miles from Betty Corrigall's lonely grave, lies the [Dwarfie Stane](#), an ancient rock-cut tomb steeped in local legends of trolls and giants. These folktales aside, archaeological evidence suggests that the burial chambers of this isolated monument were carved out approximately 5,000 years ago by people "using nothing but stone or antler tools, muscle power and patience".

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This was a period of great cultural change throughout Europe as the Neolithic 'Stone Age' gave way to the Bronze Age. So much has long been clear from the archaeological record. But was the dramatic cultural shift (indicated by material remains such as changes in pottery style) driven by the diffusion of new technologies and ideas or by the influx of new people?

DNA research has resolved the 'pots or people' debate in archaeology. We now know that the movement of people from the steppes north of the Black Sea reshaped cultural practices c. 3000 BCE and that these people — and [the diseases they brought with them](#) — supplanted the established communities of Neolithic farmers and hunter-gatherers. [Recent genetic analysis](#) of burial remains in Orkney paint the same picture: the islands “experienced a wave of immigrants during the Bronze Age so large that it replaced most of the local population”.

Nevertheless, Orkney stands apart. Unlike in much of western and central Europe, where mass population replacement was predominantly led by males, “the Bronze Age newcomers to the [Orkney] islands were mostly women”. Furthermore, in another unique finding not seen outside Orkney, the indigenous Neolithic

male genetic lineage “persisted at least 1000 years into the Bronze Age, despite replacement of 95 per cent of the rest of the genome by immigrating women”. For reasons that are still unclear, however, traces of this lineage disappeared (as occurred much more abruptly elsewhere) and is no longer found in the modern Orkney population.

Tales of the past

There’s more to these “absolutely fascinating” discoveries (to quote one of the Orkney genetic researchers). Unrelated research by linguists and cultural anthropologists has [traced traditional folktales](#) deep into the prehistoric past, dating back in some cases to the Bronze Age. Using [phylogenetic comparative methods](#) borrowed from evolutionary biology to analyze stories common to different cultures and languages, researchers have reconstructed a ‘tree’ of Indo-European languages that track the descent of shared fables across time.

[According to the findings](#), the tale of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, for example, “was rooted in a group of stories classified as *The Boy Who Stole Ogre’s Treasure*, and could trace to when Eastern and Western Indo-European languages split more than 5,000 years ago”. *Beauty And The Beast* and *Rumpelstiltskin*, meanwhile, dated to 4,000 years ago while a story about a blacksmith selling his soul to the devil “was estimated to go back 6,000 years”.

How does this apply to early Bronze Age Orkney? The newly arrived settlers not only brought new tools and technologies but likely also folktales that persist until the present day. It takes little imagination to see Bronze Age storytellers employing the remarkable acoustics of the chambers of the prehistoric Dwarfie Stane to weave captivating stories of giants and trolls, and of the boy who steals their treasure. Betty Corrigan and her fellow villagers would also have known versions of these same stories, passed down through countless generations — local variants of the fables most famously collected by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm (‘Brothers Grimm’) only decades after Betty’s untimely death. (The adaptation and variation of such stories — and indeed languages — across time and place mirror the processes of Darwinian evolution, with these cultural ‘[memes](#)’ serving as analogues to biological genes.)

Resolving claims over human remains

Now we can return to the ongoing dispute over the scientific analysis of Indigenous remains. Compare the expanding understanding of Europe’s human history — from population dispersals to particular diseases, and from food to fairy tales — with the similar potential insights lost if scientific inquiry into Indigenous history is closed off. Then consider the alternative: pairing scientific consilience with Indigenous ‘ways of knowing,’ not as a replacement (as some fear) but as a complement, circumscribed by the input and cooperation of Native cultures. Such an approach could establish connections to broader facets of ancestral culture, while unveiling unrecognized patterns in early Indigenous settlement and population movements.

Restricting research into ancient history does a disservice to modern Indigenous communities (as well as exacerbating existing inequalities in genetic research along perceived ‘racial’ lines). This stance is both unfair and patronizing, as Indigenous people share the same curiosity about the past as any other community. Scientific knowledge doesn’t necessarily abrogate personal beliefs about ancestral history nor

destroy our appreciation of folktales, legends and deeply held ancestral religious beliefs; rather, it can offer, if executed cooperatively, a more enriched understanding of Indigenous ancestry.

Visiting Betty Corrigan's lonely gravesite is a moving experience. Even the setting is evocative, high above Scapa Flow, the natural harbour at the heart of the Orkney archipelago. Despite the distance of centuries, one cannot but empathize with the poor girl, hounded and abandoned. As a species-typical human trait, empathy comes naturally — as, too, do the moralistic judgements of Betty's fellow villagers who drove her to suicide.

Science is key to rising above inherent human frailties. True, biology must acknowledge its shameful history of prejudice and intolerance. There is room for greater engagement and for mutually beneficial cooperation between scientists and Indigenous people in ways that not only benefit the native cultures but all of humanity.

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