

RACE IS...ONLY AS RACE DOES

ESSENTIALISM AND ETHNICITY IN (BIO)ARCHAEOLOGY AND SKELETAL BIOLOGY

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In recent scholarly and public skirmishes over race, racialism, and the human past, perhaps no other anthropological subfield has been as implicated—or called out, as it were—as skeletal biology.¹ Few will soon forget the Kennewick Man/Ancient One “Caucasoid” kerfuffle, and in the last decade or so a unique literature has sprung up around how, or whether or not, skeletal biologists and bioarchaeologists continue to “do race,” despite the American Association of Physical Anthropology’s insistence that “pure races do not exist” and “discrete races made up chiefly of typical representatives” are “untenable” (AAPA 1996).

The fulcra of this activity have been on the problems and possibilities of two sometimes distinct pursuits: forensic and skeletal biological classification, and biodistance research. Forensic anthropologists and skeletal biologists (craniometricians, principally) often employ reference collections of cranial data, placing ancient individuals metrically in relation to both past and present populations. The method of biodistance works on the principle that heritable differences in morphology between and within populations (or skeletal samples that must represent populations) are demonstrable through multivariate analyses of skeletal features. Interpretations of these patterns, therefore, may inform the reconstruction of past population profiles, movements, and interactions. In a few instances, some bioarchaeologists and anthropologists have critiqued these methods and inquiries as racialist and “racial-biological distance” respectively (Armstrong and Van Gerven 2003:61; and e.g., Goodman 1997; Smay and Armstrong 2000; Williams et al. 2005). On the other hand, other skeletal biologists and forensic anthropologists claim that skeletal individuals *can* be assigned population affinities, races, or even ethnicities based on morphological traits when compared to other skeletal samples (e.g., Owsley et al. 2009; Sparks and Jantz 2003). Likewise, biodistance researchers have responded that their work is neither racialist nor typological, but useful for both evolutionary and cultural approaches to past human populations (Stojanowski and Buikstra 2004).

As a bioarchaeologist with research interests in repatriation and Indigenous archaeology, I have noted elsewhere how intertwined issues of racialism, repatriation, and skeletal biology have become since the passage of NAGPRA (Kakaliouras 2008). To briefly provide a little historical context, during the first half of the twentieth century, race was the organizing principle for—and race determination was *de rigueur* methodology in—physical anthropology, losing favor as a research approach (but not as a pedagogical tool) during the New Physical Anthropology of the 1950s and 60s. Since the 1970s, both skeletal biologists and bioarchaeologists have focused their energies primarily on population and culture-based research, discerning and interpreting patterns of health/disease, trauma, growth, stress, activity patterns, as well as microevolutionary shifts in intra- and inter-population profiles due to gene flow and drift (e.g., Buikstra and Beck 2006; Larsen 1997).

Forensic anthropologists and some skeletal biologists have been and are the central proponents for skeletal race or, lately, “social race”² determination (e.g., Gill 1998; Sauer 1992). The notion that an individual’s morphology is material evidence for their cultural identity, and by extension their cultural affiliation for NAGPRA, proceeded to collide with Kennewick Man/The Ancient One (Owsley and Jantz 2002), and has continued to trouble repatriation processes, tribal governments, archaeology, and physical anthropology ever since. In the wake of struggles over cultural affiliation, then, individual classification, population affinity, and biodistance research have become the most politically incendiary lines of investigation in all of bioarchaeology and skeletal biology.

Are charges of racialism against skeletal biologists and bioarchaeologists who specialize in biodistance, however, actually deserved? Echo-Hawk and Zimmerman define racialism as “the cultural idea that humankind is composed of racial groups that are biologically distinct. These groups are based on what seem to be long-term, received wisdom from

straightforward [physical] observations of humanity” (2006:471). This explanation, though, is a rather blunt instrument for use in discourses about skeletal, or even genetic, classification and past identities, since one does not have to believe in the existence of race per se to graft phenotype (or genotype) onto past and present cultural or ethnic identities (and vice versa). To borrow and corrupt a rather technical philosophical term, perhaps “morphological essentialism”³ can be recast to describe the equation of biology and identity in the absence of other evidence. In other words, “morphological essentialism” in skeletal biology is the notion that the interpretation of metric or nonmetric skeletal trait patterns can be solely informative of a past individual’s or group’s cultural identity, independent of archaeological context (also see Zack 2000:453–457). In even more direct terms, populations are not cultures unless proven otherwise. If race, therefore, is to become ethnicity in archaeology, does it not stand to reason that biological data should inform biological interpretations, and cultural data, cultural ones?

Yet, besides all the other cultural and behavioral processes bioarchaeologists interpret from bones, gene flow (when different groups reproduce with each other) is as profoundly cultural a process as it is a microevolutionary one; documenting gene flow can be the pursuit of the material evidence of human cultural and political choices (e.g., Edgar 2009). Also, genetic drift may represent not only patterns of genetic ancestry, but also the effects of cultural and historical change. That these patterns alone—however based in cultural choice or historical events they might be—do not serve as direct indices or evidence for cultural or ethnic *identities* should be obvious. In order for the biological to inform the cultural, we need sociocultural context, which is only available for the past through archaeology and oral and documentary history.⁴

None of this means, however, that genetic and morphological studies are *inherently* racist or essentialist. Already it takes just one perusal of the literature in bioarchaeology and skeletal biology to notice that race is rarely on topic. In fact, in our current cultural moment, it is wrangling over race that seems to dominate academic discourse, not the productive use of a race concept to help us understand diverse pasts. Furthermore, scholarship focused on the contextualized analysis and interpretation of information from bones⁵ has jettisoned race as a pivot point for analysis, preferring populations, ethnic/cultural groups, and richly provenienced burial sites. So, pinning racialism in biological anthropology on entire methodologies (i.e., craniometrics and biological distance), as some critics have done, has certainly been an effective rhetorical device for convincing other anthropologists

that there are, in theory, better ways to see interactions between human morphologies, cultural processes, and ethnic identities. Such critique, though, only serves to marginalize some of the most compelling work on practice and identity in bioarchaeology, recent investigations by regional specialists who keep their interpretations fully grounded in relevant archaeological contexts (e.g., Knudson and Stojanowski 2009; Rakita et al. 2005). Further, it distracts us from beginning to work together on even better ways to detect and interpret the formation and trajectories of ethnicities in the archaeological record.

Rather than either continue to review or confront these discourses, then, I prefer to imagine a few more steps bioarchaeologists and skeletal biologists might take to actively resist racialism and “morphological essentialism” in our field.⁶ So, if for the most part bioarchaeologists and skeletal biologists are not actively “doing race,” what is it that we are doing, or not doing, about race and racialism?⁷ Perhaps we are simply lacking the same kind of *practice* as the discipline of archaeology. Whatever our research specialties, we are not having rigorous public discussions about racialism or essentialism, and therefore we may continue to allow the slippage of biology, morphology, and population into potentially essentialist interpretations about culture and ethnicity (per the claims made about the SAA in this issue). Perhaps there are common avenues for archaeologists and bioarchaeologists to travel toward challenging each other to finally replace race with ethnicity or with other concepts that acknowledge the cultural construction and maintenance of people’s identities.⁸ Additionally, in this pursuit there should be ways to invite further collaborations with descendant communities, thereby embracing the kind of multivocality about the past that has recently emerged in archaeological research and scholarship in general (Zimmerman 2007).

One place to continue this trend might be in the re-evaluation or re-conceptualization of the ways we use the concept of ancestry. Anthropologists and descendant communities all share deep interests in ancestry as an organizing principle for tracking descent, as an emic concept or way of understanding the past, and even as a force for the construction of contemporary social realities. Certainly, cultural, political, and often nationalist meanings are inscribed onto statements about biological ancestry. Is it not, though, intellectually troubling to let morphological similarities or differences trigger deeply ensconced cultural desires to fix ancestral identities, rather than complicate our assumed notions of past human contacts and interactions? Moreover, as the Kennewick cases show, the current cultural and legal context has tended to privilege the biological component of cultural

affiliation under NAGPRA. A central way to perhaps underline the “cultural” in “cultural affiliation” is to endeavor to do ethnicity better than essentialism (morphology as identity) is or was being done.⁹

To wit, the way that physical anthropologists in general discuss ancestral identities as functions of morphology deserves more nuanced discussion. Goodman, in reference to the African Burial Ground Project, describes not one but three different and potentially mutually exclusive concepts of ancestry as they are employed by the ABG researchers:

Each of these categories of identity—genetic, cultural, and geographic—incorporates complexity and heterogeneity. For example, groups move, so geographic ancestries are multiple; genetic systems are multiple, so there are many possible genetic ancestries; and, similarly, social ancestries are anything but stable and monolithic...[M]y point is that one needs to at least get away from the notion that knowing one type of ancestry predicts the others. But testing how the types intersect is interesting [2007:228].

Along these lines, bioarchaeology could more complexly explore and re-analyze our ancestor-descendant and “similarity” relationship interpretations. What does it mean to say, for one of many examples, that “the Kennewick individual is always on the same [statistical] twig as the Ainu of Japan and Polynesians, no matter what combination of other groups is used” (Brace et al. 2008:161)? This morphological statement—alone—has little bearing on the Kennewick Man/Ancient One’s social-ethnic, and possibly even geographic, ancestries. Even if we add the concept of morphological ancestry to the three described above, which is absolutely reasonable, his physical similarity to any Ainu, Japanese, or Polynesian, past or present, does not directly inform our understanding of his cultural ancestry.

Similarly, the way archaeologists and bioarchaeologists have developed, used, and passed down classifications applied to past peoples into the next disciplinary generation often has acculturated us into their uncritical use and reification. Like archaeological cultures—and often parallel and dependent on them—pre-modern population labels are etic constructions, sometimes traversing geographic and temporal distances unknown to the people whose remains¹⁰ are being investigated. As Dongoske et al. (1997) suggest, archaeological cultures and past or present ethnicities can and do operate with different definitional systems and on varied scales of analysis. But, is it possible to bring some of those classifications closer together? Can we allow clan, band, or tribal

genealogies and naming systems to interact, or exist alongside (bio)archaeological classifications? In some well-documented cases in the archaeological record, then, might it be at least interesting to employ emically derived terms for “ancestor” rather than stick to a strictly etic label, such as “Late Woodland,” or even “pre or proto” –group or culture? Re-evaluating our ancestral cultural terminologies, too, could be a conceptual nexus for scientists and descendant communities to continue reshaping a more collective understanding of the past, rather than one dependent on and accessible to only specialized knowledges and disciplines.

If these queries and imaginings seem impractical to the readership of *The SAA Archaeological Record*, they probably are, given the way skeletal biology and archaeology can still operate independently of each other. It is likely, as well, that disagreements will continue between biological anthropologists and others over the utility of “morphological ancestry” for understanding past cultures or for ethnically identifying skeletal individuals. Do we, however, need to raptly attend to or participate in these conflicts to enhance our understandings of the lives of past peoples? If we continued to embrace the notion that human *biocultural* history, culture, and ethnicity are our proper centers for analysis, would we actually have much to mourn in the loss of the “soft racialism” that equating morphology with cultural identity represents?

Many skeletal biologists and bioarchaeologists, though, have positioned themselves well vis-à-vis ethnicity in the last few years; I would invite them to use their multidisciplinary experiences to aid conversations about race and ethnicity between archaeologists, Indigenous archaeologists, anthropologists, and descendant communities. Further, the entire field of anthropology and many descendant communities will continue to struggle with larger cultural and economic pressures that impinge on daily life and practice, such as funding constraints, the often crushing workload generated by compliance with NAGPRA, teaching loads, joblessness, and poverty. Nevertheless, should we not explore—or keep exploring—the interactions between different and contradictory ancestries instead of passively limiting the profusion and complexity of past and present human identities? Only frank and potentially difficult discussions about race, ethnicity, and cultural affiliation will allow us to continue to productively neglect racialism and “morphological essentialism” in our research about, and interpretations of, diverse human pasts.

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Notes

1. Although anthropological genetics and ancient DNA studies have also been implicated as potentially essentialist pursuits, I have not focused on them here in order to preserve a consistent focus on skeletal biology and morphology.

2. See Ousley et al. (2009:68–69) for an explanation of social race.

3. Morphological essentialism in philosophy is expressed in the maxim: "objects cannot change their shape" (Casati and Varzi 2000:230). For an example of the term's use in a biological framework, see Stamos's (2004:119–120) discussion of essentialist ideas regarding species boundaries.

4. Additionally, while the samples that make up skeletal reference and cranial data collections (e.g., Hamann-Todd, Howells, Lisbon, and Terry) are mostly drawn from either known archaeological sites or known individuals, the statistical similarity or dissimilarity of individuals or groups to those represented in reference samples does not necessarily lead one to robust interpretations about cultural or population identities (e.g., Watkins 2006; Williams et al. 2005).

5. Those in the repatriation movement who wish for no scientific study of human remains whatsoever will no doubt be unimpressed with any claim that takes as a given the existence or perpetuation of fields like skeletal biology and bioarchaeology. Likewise, anti-repatriation or pro-science views are by no means dead (e.g., Friends of America's Past 2009; Weiss 2008). Extreme polarities will continue to color discourses over the study of human remains in general, though I make no essentialist assumptions about who stands where. That such study is likely to continue is, however, a reasonable speculation.

6. For a recent historical and contemporary picture of race and variation in biological anthropology, see the May 2009 special issue of *The American Journal of Physical Anthropology*.

7. I would assert that studying bones is not an inherently racist or racialist activity. It is, however, at least in the U.S., a privilege afforded to some because of a colonialist and racist past as well as continuing patterns of unequal access to higher education. Likewise, the cultural inclination to be interested in handling and

spending time with the remains of the dead is a part of the Western scientific tradition, and not valued universally by the diverse groups who make up the U.S.

8. The relatively modern and etic concept of ethnicity might also not always translate well into ancient contexts.

9. To be clear, I do not intend to imply that morphology and biology have nothing to contribute to efforts in determining cultural affiliation for the purposes of NAGPRA compliance—an already amazingly complicated job for anthropologists and tribal governments alike, especially given the current revisions proposed by the DOI for the disposition of culturally unaffiliated remains (SAA). However, dependence on biology to index identity is an essentialist and unfortunately attractive notion, one that should not be allowed to supersede other lines in the category "preponderance of the evidence" that Congress delineated in the original law.

10. The words "remains," "skeletal individuals," and perhaps other terms used in archaeology and biological anthropology are also not without political power, simultaneously placing their subjects within a scientific context and discouraging alternatives. I use them here out of convenience and cognizance of this publication's primary readership (i.e., Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006).

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