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The Ethical Dilemma that has Ensnared Penn Museum

The societal growth of understanding and recognizing discrimination and prejudice has been ongoing for centuries. Yet, there is still a long path to embark upon in order to facilitate peaceful relations. This journey consequently receives backlash from the majority, but this backlash has been the cause of discriminatory practices within scientific studies, including scientific racism. The nationalization of this social upheaval has caused a new light, often through force, to shine upon ethical dilemmas already present within our society. The case of the Morton G. Cranial Collection at the Penn Museum has been one of many cases disrespecting anthropological ethics by the unethical attainment and research of the hundreds of African American skulls. Utilizing this case as an example, the unethical storage and research of human remains greatly disrespects those communities involved and the anthropological community as a whole. Therefore, human remains must be treated from the perspective of those communities' culture, beliefs, and practices otherwise the situation becomes an ethical dilemma surrounded by social and political controversy.

The problem at hand consists of numerous unethical practices conducted by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Penn Museum) with two distinct cases. The first case occurred in 1985 when Philadelphia police bombed the headquarters of the separatist group, MOVE, killing six members of the separatist group along with five of their children. (Flaherty) Originally entrusted to the museum to help identify the

remains, Penn Museum later utilized the remains for private research, of which specific staff members utilized those remains as a “case study” for a forensic anthropology course. Due to no next of kin initially claiming these remains, they remained within the museum’s storage, only to be successfully identified decades later thanks to newer technology. The second ethical dilemma consists of the Morton Cranial Collection, which contains hundreds of collected and accessioned skulls from across the world. These skulls were obtained through a loan and later a gift in the 1960s’ to the Penn Museum by friends of Morton, the original curator. The collection had been acquired through the excavation of unmarked graves of black Philadelphians and enslaved individuals originating from Havana, Cuba, and the United States (Bishara) along with his worldwide connections of “scientific colleagues to merchants, military figures, and missionaries” who picked crania off of battlefields, graves, and sites of disaster. (Renschler, Monge) Once the property of Samuel G. Morton “whose pioneering ... ethnographic work in the nineteenth century laid the scientific foundation for the racists claim that color-based (i.e., race-based) differences are *species* differences” and professed that “intellectual ability can be deduced from cranial measurements” through the evidence provided by the collected skulls. (Samudzi) Amassed from 1799 to 1851, Morton had numerous periods of location-specific accession from regions such as Latin America, native burial and battlegrounds, and localized/international army medical tents. (Renschler, Monge) Although the entire collection and research process was conducted upon the whole crania collection, the primary focus of this paper shall surround his localized acquisition of Black and enslaved individuals due to the recent social backlash the museum received in 2020.

Scientific racism has been funded and utilized by colonialistic nations to place reasoning behind enslavement and degradation of their fellow humans. Whether motivated through

religion, morals, or society; there arose a need to justify the treatment and enslavement of others. In the case at hand, individuals with African ancestry shall be the focal point, however, it must be noted that scientific racism extends into many other *supposed* human species, such as how England viewed the Irish, how Western European immigrants viewed Eastern European immigrants in the United States, those deemed “mentally unfit”, and women internationally. The Samuel G. Morton Cranial Collection is one of the many cases contributing to the research put into the justification of these racist ideologies. Luckily, as a result of NAGPRA, a large portion of the collection had been repatriated, except crania from other backgrounds. Therefore, the large remaining portion of the collection were those of African ancestry.

As stated above, the origin of a portion of the Morton Cranial Collection had been unmarked graves of enslaved individuals from Philadelphia, Havana, and Cuba. At the time of the collection during the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century, slavery had been prevalent within the Americas. The collection of skulls of African ancestry, therefore, continued this belief system of the nineteenth-century United States. Of course, this ideology exists in modern times. Although not the same blatant racism, today racism still exists within society, marketing, the workplace, inter-relationships, etc., causing the ethical dilemmas of the Penn Museum to hurt deep. Only through protest from activists and the growth of publicity for the Black Lives Matter movement has motivated the museum and university to repatriate and apologize for utilizing the Morton Cranial Collection and those remains from the MOVE bombing. This overlapping violence disgusts and concerns anthropologists and other academics because of the violence presented by “academic institutions keeping the remains of Black people rather than relinquishing those remains for burial”. (Flaherty) The University of Pennsylvania and Penn Museum formed a committee to discuss repatriation and how to handle both the

Morton Cranial Collection and MOVE bombing victims during the summer of 2020. The nationalization of police violence and the murders of numerous Black Americans likely motivated the university and museum to take action as well, but the speed of conducting such did not occur until after the public protested and made light of the ethical dilemma which had ensnared the involved parties in 2021.

The museum worked to preserve the remains in question through proper curation and stewardship practices, but due to the fragility of skulls, they should have placed them within curatorial safe boxes instead of lined up on shelving. Still, the original collection had established a foundation for this preservation. Morton, successors, and colleagues varnished, tattooed with ink, and labeled each cranium, resulting in the impressive organization of the collection. On the other hand, the cultures and identities of the human remains became generalized and hidden 'out of sight out of mind'. Although this perspective may have worked towards the avoidance of biased research, the grounds of how the Morton Cranial Collection was accessioned violates human rights and remains a backward way of thought. Since each skull became generalized, each cultural and ethnic affiliation had been ignored or even considered a separate species. Improper burial aspects (including excavating human remains from graves), treatment of the dead, and violations of cultural practices were undermined. Yet, this practice remained within the collection for over a century, with consistent use throughout that time. If the skulls were repatriated decades ago when donated to the museum, they would have still remained controversial. However, the reality of how their repatriation was influenced by protests, activists, and the public nationalization of long existent social disparities placed a fire under Penn Museum and the University of Pennsylvania to quickly and efficiently resolve the problem and maintain their public image,

Numerous communities had been involved and affected by the storage and utilization of the Morton Cranial Collection. These groups include descendant communities, academics, anthropologists, students, faculty, and those individuals whose human remains are a part of the collection. Looking at those directly involved, the descendant communities either within the area or in a separate country did not provide consent for their familial remains to be stolen, studied, and utilized for teaching. Of course, at the time of collection, this had not been deemed necessary due to colonialistic values and the goal to prove that those communities were a separate species and therefore could not advocate for themselves. Yet, those individuals who make up the collection were exhumed, denied funerary rights, and lost their dignity to not only themselves but to their families. Also, the collection consisted solely of crania. The loved ones for every individual stolen for the collection had to bury those individuals without their heads and subsequently had adverse effects upon the cultural practices for burials and after-death beliefs

The continuation of use of the collection subsequently allows for this mindset to permeate within academics. Due to this, “anthropologists and other academics expressed concern, disgust, or both at the description of apparent neglect,” in application to the Morton Collection and MOVE remains. (Flaherty) The surrounding national atmosphere already expressed sensitivity to the topic of race due to numerous Black victims of police violence. The publicization of these murders in the summer of 2020 was reflected upon the Morton Cranial Collection, casting a shadow upon the University of Pennsylvania to take action of the racial dilemma present within its custody. The possession of the collection impacted not only faculty and academics but those students who worked with the collection. Beyond working with the remains, those communities within Philadelphia are directly affected by the recurring police violence that summer. Those affected in the surrounding community, particularly persons of

color, are not only affected by the non-consensual research and study of their potential ancestors but have been living under the same colonialistic regulations that previously encaptured the individuals within the Morton Cranial Collection.

Built off of the above statement, the Morton Cranial Collection is relevant to all parties involved. Due to the developing negativity from the ethical dilemma, the Morton Cranial Collection consequently placed a bad taste within the mouths of Penn Museum's patrons. These patrons include the surrounding community, academics, faculty, and students. By doing such, anthropology is placed under this negative light. The anthropology field is rooted within the collection and is the concept of the Penn Museum as a whole. Therefore, this situation may reduce their patron and revenue, especially if those patrons are a part of descendant communities. In the worse case, anthropology, in general, could be shunned throughout the community. Not only would the museum lose revenue, but the university would too due to a decrease of incoming students. No student openly chooses to attend a university that blatantly affected their profession, and consequently affects the workforce stigmatization within their achieved anthropology degree.

Not only had the collection itself proved controversial, but the Penn Museum and the University of Pennsylvania proved controversial as well. Seen through the guidelines provided by the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA), actions were taken by the Penn Museum's repatriation committee, and the continuation of utilizing the Morton Cranial Collection are all examples of how the collection was shrouded in controversy. As a discipline, anthropology has numerous guidelines in place to maintain ethical practices. Serious harm may be done if one does not follow and respect the American Anthropological Association (AAA) code of ethics such as "harm to dignity, and to bodily and material well-being, especially when

research is conducted among vulnerable populations”. (Flaherty) The Morton Cranial Collection must further follow those guidelines provided by the AAPA. Utilizing these ethics, anthropologists must actively consult the “affected individuals or group(s), with the goal of establishing a working relationship that can be beneficial to all parties involved”. (AABA) Consent of individuals involved is necessary as well. Even though no consent was obtained during the original collecting procured and accomplished by Morton, “the informed consent process is dynamic and continuous,” therefore descendant communities should be contacted about the remains. (AABA) The Penn Museum failed to properly conduct the aforementioned ethical policies by utilizing the remains for teaching, researching, and training without granted consent. This causes not only the exploitation of the individuals within the collection but disrespects and desecrates those dignities held by the surrounding and descendant communities.

To conduct research means responsibility, of which “anthropological researchers bear responsibility for the integrity and reputation of their discipline, of scholarship, and of science”. (AABA) Thus the repatriation committee formed by Penn Museum had to meet these standards. Yet, the committee had worked to subtly alleviate the problem by repatriating the collection, but once the controversy became public, the museum and university received backlash. This is controversial due to the succinct execution of the established plan *after* protests took place, as it took months to facilitate the committee but only a few days once protests occurred. Likely the reason behind limited to no implications of repatriating and reevaluating the remains occurred is due to the revenue income the museum received for housing and displaying the famous collection. Although donated in the 1960s’, the museum had plenty of time to reevaluate the collection. In fact, this was already conducted in the 1990s due to the implementation of NAGPRA. Those classified under a different minority group, such as African Americans in this

case, remained within the collection. Here, a colonialistic mindset was limited, but the remaining collection fell victim to colonialistic practices. Rooted within these practices, maintaining and utilizing the Morton Cranial Collection allows for the institution and presence of previous ideologies that the collection is affiliated with. Scientific racism is embedded within the history of the collection, and therefore the continuation of use fuels this once prevalent mindset.

The existent controversy subsequently caused the ethical dilemma to become nationally known. Piggybacking off of the rise in the Black Lives Matter movement and the publicization of disparities within our society; activism, and protests against the Morton Cranial Collection had taken place within Philadelphia and on campus. It is due to the publication of the aforementioned movements that likely even pushed Penn Museum to reevaluate its collection. Only a few days after the protests conducted by about “50 UPenn students and activists from Police Free Penn (PFP) and Black & Brown Workers Co-op,” Penn Museum moved forward with their requests of “urging the museum to abolish the Morton Collection, end the use of data sourced from the collection and repatriate all of its contents, among other demands”. (Bishara) Concurrently, many organizations and corporations worked to make their presence as allies to the Black Lives Matter movement. As a result, these organizations reevaluated their policies, ethics, and methods in order to identify how they can improve and prevent future racial disparities in all fields of action. The Penn Museum had been among these organizations by the summer of 2020. Although they worked to resolve the repatriation of the Morton Cranial Collection, the public became aware of the matter. Since the collection is rooted in the long-held unethical debate of scientific racism, the public backlash was quick to take action and maintain persistence. Official word of the repatriation of the collection occurred the next April of 2021 and still continues to put a stir into the anthropological community.

The deviation of how to handle the dilemma and how to handle the human remains had been determined by the Morton Collection Committee. Consisting of museum leadership, staff, anthropologists, and students, the committee comprehensively evaluated the “next steps for repatriation and reburial since last summer”. (Bishara) Although the Penn Museum and the University of Pennsylvania have chosen to repatriate the human remains, this process takes time and has only taken into effect in April of 2021. Once repatriation is in process, the individuals within the collection shall be transferred to next of kin or communities of origin in the United States, Havana, and Cuba. For those where this is not possible, cremation shall commence.

Thanks to activism and protests, awareness of the Morton Cranial Collection and its origin became publicly known. Instead of the collection’s privatization, the Penn Museum had been advised to not only “reassess its practices of collecting, storing, displaying, and researching human remains,” but to facilitate a location for visitation that “provides a quiet, contemplative space for reconnections and consultation visits in its future plans for rehousing the collections”. (Bishara) Lastly, the repatriation of the Morton Cranial Collection influenced other progressive actions within the museum and university. This includes an overall reanalysis of their practices, methods, and analyses for current and future collection. Along with the president of the University of Pennsylvania, Gunter M. Ziegler, shall work on the obstruction of “more archaeological excavations on the campus”, and instead “opting to further distance the institution from the historical violence carried out on its grounds”. (Samudzi) After the above actions are instituted, only then can the university and museum work to distance themselves from their past.

Looking forward, the ethical dilemma of the Morton Cranial Collection shall motivate future reevaluations of national museum practices and for similar collections acquired with a colonialistic mindset. Secondly, an expansion of the Native American Graves Protection and

Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) to incorporate other minoritized populations. Repatriation and unethical practices with human remains expand beyond those of Native Americans. In this case, African Americans and other skulls of African descent are collections that “fall between the gaps”. (Flaherty) Incorporating all minoritized groups prevents future and existing unethical obtainment, research, storage, and display of those groups already at a social, economic, and political disadvantage. Lastly, organizations may consider the public’s and communities’ opinions into account. As the University of Pennsylvania and Penn Museum had learned, those opinions of surrounding groups are essential and can vastly impact what goes on behind the scenes. Already anthropological institutions take affected groups within a research study into consideration with formal consent for all processes of the research. Therefore, the surrounding community is an aspect of research, especially the descendant communities living within Philadelphia, and must provide consent or supply full transparency for those next of kin.

The Morton G. Cranial Collection is one of many collections stuck in time. As society and culture adapt to those changes within the treatment and degradation of minority groups, museum collections shall follow. Although it may take extensive time, institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania and Penn Museum will establish protocols, methods of collection and storage, stewardship, and acts of transparency that benefit the affected communities. Once ignored and deemed helpless, African Americans and others of African descent are striving to make their perspectives, experiences, and opinions known. Incorporating these into anthropological and museum collections is essential in order to maintain integrity and trust between anthropologists and groups of study.

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