My entry into the field of archaeology began as a pre-med student at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1990. That fall, I wandered into Professor Phillip Walker’s Human Osteology lab looking for training in forensic anthropology. Throughout the next two years, I learned as much as I could about the methods physical anthropologists use in the re-creation of individual lives and prehistoric communities. My work in the lab was without question among the most fascinating experiences in my life. But parallel to this excitement ran an equally troubling set of questions.

A housing development in the Sacramento area had been slated for construction at the site of a large sacred burial ground. Professor Walker was working with a descendant community of Native Americans and arranging for the reburial of their ancestors. I had grown up in the California school system and had spent my entire life in complete ignorance of these people. Why had I never heard of them? Why were the houses not relocated to a different area? Would this have happened if this had been an African American cemetery, a Chinese cemetery, or a Euro-American cemetery where the people who tended the graves were homeowners, voters, or citizens themselves? How had such an important site been alienated from the tribe? What had happened here? And most important, why did I not know the answers to these questions? Who had failed to tell me their story?

As I was to learn over the next few years, the answers were both simple and very troubling. The sense of dislocation between the past and present, between the material remains of our ancestors and descendant
communities, is very real. And the kinds of questions archaeologists ask (or do not ask) have very real political and material consequences for contemporary Native Americans. The power to create narratives of the past, to tell some stories, to articulate some histories and not others, is and has always been political.

In working with those remains, I realized that in siding and sexing the bones, looking for paleopathologies, determining age, evaluating peri- and postmortem fractures, and so forth, I was inscribing these people with a history of my own making. Wrapped in the language of medicine, I was writing a postmortem or autopsy a thousand years after death. But to what ends? Where would this information go? Who would read it? Was this new narrative, these new inscriptions of meaning, the truth? Or did this type of recognition of the body obscure other worthwhile, more prescient, and valuable historical narratives? Why was archaeology so comfortable in privileging the former and so disinterested of the historical?

These questions have served as the basis for both this book and the development of what I have termed “Indigenous archaeology.” This book is my first attempt at this unique approach to the past. Despite the fears of some archaeologists who may wish to impose a kind of intellectual apartheid, a “separate yet equal” partition of archaeological research (McGhee 2009), an Indigenous approach to archaeology does not limit or displace scientific research. It merely poses as its fundamental project the reintegration of Indigenous materials, remains, history, and research with contemporary Indigenous peoples. This work, currently practiced on a large scale throughout the United States under the auspices of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), has remained terribly underrepresented in North American archaeological journals, is poorly understood by many people who do archaeology in the United States, and has been criticized by a vocal, conservative group of scholars who refer to themselves as “scientific archaeologists.” These individuals have not welcomed the changes ushered in by NAGPRA and see the entry of Native Americans (myself and others) into the discipline as a threat to the future of the field.

No such threat exists. It is my belief that the future intellectual and ethical vitality of the discipline depends on collaborative methods (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; Silliman 2008), the reversal of terminal narratives that explain the disappearance and alienation of the past from Native peoples, and the rejection of the idea that Indian scholars have no place within the discipline of archaeology. We do have
a place, but one should not expect us to create the same kinds of archaeologies that existed before our entry into the field. To expect so is to embrace the worst of all kind of tokenism. No field that calls itself a science should be afraid of new information, new perspectives, or new interpretations.

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