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Indebted to Thieves

Rachelle M. Besaw

I can still remember my badge, that little laminated rectangle that shouted to the world that I was a certified student tour guide at the Heard Museum, a museum that prides itself on telling the stories of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas from a first-person perspective via art. Its shiny white surface and terracotta-picture background proudly displayed my grinning eleven-year-old face, my Cost Cutter's discount pixie cut, my almond eyes crinkling with joy. It legitimized me and made me part of the secret society of docents and tour guides who got to see the back offices of the Heard; I had access to an Indigenous space and was required to ask permission from no one. To simply exist and share space with a history that at once felt so distant and so close to home.

It was interesting to grow up in a large metropolis like Phoenix and be surrounded by classmates who were Diné, Hopi, Yaqui, O'odham, and others, and yet be an outsider. I remember the first time someone recognized my tribe when I told them I was Menominee, a tall young man who'd begun the student tour guide program, Roger McKinney. On meeting him, he laughed and said, "So you're Menominee, huh? You know what the Potowatomi call Menoms, right? Me-no-money!" I laughed then, and thinking about it still makes me laugh now; some may see it as cruel, to tell an eleven-year-old her tribe was poor, but that's part of the beauty of Indigenous humor: life is sometimes very hard and cruel, and embodied in the healing is creating humor where the hurt lies. I know this exists within many other groups, but for those of us who are Indigenous, it just tastes like home to have one's laughter coat their tongue rather than the hurt; it's a balm, to live in a good way when faced with the unchangeable past. I didn't understand then the socioeconomic and governmental policies affecting my tribe, but I do now. Then, I was simply overjoyed that the word Menominee was intimately known, and that my people were not just a story I'd had to tell to so many others. We were real; in this Southwestern world, I was seen.

The first time the handful of student guides were led through the exhibit, a hush fell over our group. The dimly lit entrance was like walking into a cool, shadowy cocoon of serenity that I'd never really experienced before in my hot and loud city. It was tranquil and dark; inviting animal noises crooned over the speaker systems. It was

a magical place, the floors and walls decorated like the areas of the US they covered: the grassy plains; our own Southwestern desert; the red Colorado Plateau; the Rio Grande; the Northwest Coast; the Arctic; and finally, the forested Great Lakes. I was drawn to it like a moth to the buzzing fluorescent lights of the city, unable to resist the call of the seed beads and joyous florals awaiting me in the display cases of the Great Lakes. It was there that I truly remember, for the first time, looking upon the art of my ancestors. The flowing florals and bright leaves, the twisting and curling vines heavy with berries. I put my hands up to the glass and could *feel* the life in the whorls of beads that bent with every stitch; and for the first time, I felt connected to my heritage in a city so far away. While the museum tag simply read “Great Lakes Bandolier Bag,” I knew better. I knew that every time I would give that tour, I’d be drawn to the beadwork and applique. I’d tell the other little kids about my people, what little I knew of them, and do my ancestors proud.

And I was, and I did. And I knew, every time I gave that tour, that I did not give it alone. Even as a young child, I knew that what was behind those glass casements was alive, and it didn’t belong in the hot, arid desert where we both found ourselves. When I visited, it felt as if neither of us were alone, so far from where we were supposed to be.

The exhibition “Every Picture Tells a Story” ran from September 9, 2002, to April 17, 2017, at the Heard Museum. I was proud to be a part of the first group of student tour guides there. Not only was it an experience that helped my expressive adolescent self, but it helped me to connect to a part of my identity that was otherwise unavailable. While my family had briefly lived off-reservation in Wisconsin when I was very small—and only for about a year—the Heard was my only access to my cultural heritage and our material culture. Poor kids from inner-city Phoenix don’t get to see Woodland art every day.

My experience cannot be unique to the Indigenous community, but in the following pages, I hope to explore what it feels like to be an Indigenous researcher who nonetheless feels indebted to the exploitative, settler colonial researchers of the past in order to feel connected to my community. As an adult, I know that my experiences in the role of student tour guide were uncommon, in that if it had been a tour program at a non-Indigenous museum, I may have felt quite differently in a space that was not as welcoming as the Heard. While the Heard is a museum dedicated more to maintaining permanent exhibits of tribes and nations of the southwestern geographical areas, it meant a great deal that artwork from my ancestors had the opportunity to find me so far away. Sadly, I cannot find records of that bandolier bag existing in the Heard online except for a personal blog posted in 2005.¹ Regardless, the experience was pivotal in the formation of my self-identity as an Indigenous person in a Western academic space, and I often think about what that connection may have changed within the course of my life and studies. This article proceeds in two parts. In the first half, I discuss the violent history of extractive anthropology and linguistics upon Indigenous groups, with a focus on my own Menominee community. I include a brief discussion of the moral and ethical implications of these acts from an Indigenous worldview perspective. The latter half of this article turns to discuss what it means

to be an Indigenous researcher who is navigating their academic journey and being cognizant of the marginal space they inhabit, while paying the debts owed to their community through their research.

SPIRIT STEALERS AND WORD THIEVES: THE HISTORY

The idea of the “dying” civilizations of Native Americans has entranced settlers since first settling on Turtle Island. The romanticization of the “noble savage,” the white savior complex that rallies so many to pity doomed peoples (and do nothing to actively help, but instead, take satisfaction in the mere idealization of helping), and the collections they have produced are as common today as they were a hundred years ago. Indigenous languages are part of these collections. In recent times, the call to save so-called dying languages has created a sense of “vicarious ecotourism of the mind,” wherein, when faced with the given speech community at hand, the tourist’s first response is to “stand silent and awestruck as waves of appreciation mixed with melancholy wash over us.”² For these “tourists,” it is not in the actual *doing* of the thing or the safeguarding of anything; it is in the act of ogling “the other” under the guise of preservation, combined with the knowledge that it will soon die out—feeling a sense of having experienced it before it has completely perished. The pervasive fantasy among Western scholars of “saving” Indigenous groups throughout the Americas has been focused not only on the collection of our mother tongues, our lands, our material cultures, but even the collection and hoarding of our bodies—and the rigidity with which institutions continue to hold on these things (as if they’ve a right to own what can never be possessed) is an ongoing battle for many tribes. The collections of many individuals and groups may have stemmed from an interest in preserving history for future American consumption or science, but unfortunately that has not always been the case. Many individual collectors with the money and the means to begin their collections did so simply out of a morbid curiosity about “the other,” to display art and funerary objects of “exotic” tribes as a sort of novelty.³ Perhaps one of the most well-known of these is John Peabody Harrington, a prolific collector of Californian Indigenous languages. His work stemmed not from the need to preserve language for the future use of its descendants but, instead, from his desire to be the first person to document and squirrel away the data before “his imagined ‘competitors’ had been there last, or might go there next”—to expand his collection.⁴

For the Menominee in particular, this rush to collect and hoard objects of interest by individuals on behalf of museums throughout the United States—“salvage anthropology”—was such that the trauma of the collections can be felt a century and more later. Perhaps one of the most notorious collectors, anthropologist Alanson Skinner, is still known today; although his name may not be spoken as often, his deeds have never been forgotten. With the turn of the twentieth century and the rapid pace of assimilationist policies toward Indigenous groups in the United States, anthropologists and linguists sought to procure as many Indigenous items and lexicons of interest as possible before they “disappeared.” But Indigenous communities were not always willing to part with these objects.

Skinner and the Menominee: Collecting the Physical

Before I can fully address whether Indigenous communities felt willing to part with their history, it's important to set the scene. Imagine: Your Community has either been wholly or partially removed from your ancestral homelands due to the consolidation of tribal lands into the hands of the federal government, and you now live on a reservation that may or may not be geographically close to your original homelands. Your traditional ways of food procurement— farming, hunting, fishing, gathering, or trading—have been decimated, and you now rely almost entirely on federal subsistence programs to feed your family. Your heritage language has been targeted for elimination, speakers may be few, and you are told that if you do not speak English, you are most certainly not a “real American.” Your religion has been outlawed, and you face legal repercussions if you get caught practicing. Your children have been removed and sent to boarding schools. Maybe you survived a boarding school. Maybe you have faced horrific, unspeakable traumas that have changed the trajectory of every single generation that springs from your line. You have been told, in no uncertain terms, that your culture is dying, and there is no way to save it.

Except one.

A charming scientist from the White world has come to you, offered you a bit of security in the form of food, or money, or a bribe in the form of alcohol (which your elders taught you not to take, but sometimes it helps to ease the pangs of hunger and loss), or the promise to save your culture for the future. The *future*. That far-off hope that one day, things will be better. You have sent your sacred items and parts of your spirit into the future, to guide those children yet unborn, whom you've stewarded the land for, tried your hardest to keep your memories and rituals alive for. This white man doesn't understand your ways, but the promises he makes are honeyed with hope, and while nervous, you feel as if you have no other choice but to relent and put your future in his hands. The Western world has taken everything else from you, but maybe this time, if you give it to this outsider, it will be protected for the unborn who are yet to reclaim it. Surely, giving it to them will ensure a future chance of reclamation. Perhaps you sell your things because you have turned from the traditional path your ancestors walked; perhaps you sell them because you needed the money or the food to survive; or, perhaps you sell them because you think they're being stored in a safe place for your children.

The circumstances in which these items were sold to outsiders were myriad and complex. Whatever the case may have been, anthropologists and linguists alike found ways in which to get the items they sought, legally or not. George Dorsey, curator of the Chicago Field Museum, in a letter dated January 31, 1900, to Stephen Simms, advises thus:

When you go into an Indian's house and you do not find the old man at home and there is something you want, you can do one of three things: go hunt up the old man and keep hunting until you find him; give the old woman such price for it as she may ask for it, running the risk that the old man will be offended; or steal it. I tried all three plans and I have no choice to recommend.⁵

With this partiality in mind, Alanson Skinner's knowledge of the practice of hospitality and sacredness led him to the supposed understanding that offering *nāēqnemāw* (tobacco), a "signal of both spirituality and friendship," and offering to purchase an item four times—which he said was a sacred number to the Menominee—many would relent.⁶ This was due in part to his pressures, as well as choosing his targets well, because "his favorite prey included the elderly, people with little money, religious converts, and heirs to family relics."⁷

Off a road taken only by those who live on the rez, down a trail that many avoid, near a mighty river that roars with anger, there lie mounds of our ancestors. For generations, many in the scientific community argued that these mounds could not possibly have been made by the hands of the Menominee, but anthropologists and collectors such as Skinner, Samuel Barrett, curator of the Milwaukee Public Museum, and Arthur Kannenberg, director of the Oshkosh Public Museum, knew our stories and believed our word when we said these mounds were the sacred resting place of our ancestors.⁸ One of the deepest wounds, still raw today, is the unearthing of these mounds; the secret digging in the night and when others were away, the stealing of our bones and the spirits that lie within them. The tribe and its members were not asked if this would be allowed, because it was not necessary to do so at this time: "With the passage of the Antiquities Act of 1906, credentialed archaeologists became the [US's] stewards of historical sites on federal lands."⁹

Why were these mounds unearthed? For those in the Native community, it was obvious: museum shelves were sitting empty when they could be brimming with the bones of our peoples. The fact remains that when these teams dug up the mounds and disturbed those who had walked on, "they were interested in filling their museums' display cases with everything from human remains to funerary objects to pottery. . . . Satterlee [a Menominee worker contracted closely with Skinner] was the only Indian digger comfortable enough to work alone. The others felt the presence of the spirits they were violating."¹⁰ While there are several accounts on Satterlee throughout the historical record, it is widely accepted that he was of mixed Menominee and white heritage and often found himself torn between two worlds. Anecdotally, he was prone to vices that could have been exploited by anthropologists at the time, though whether this led him to disinter his ancestors is unknown.

Knowing that others were filling their collections, and especially wary of Skinner, Henry Ward, director of the Milwaukee Public Museum, gave Barrett (who was "still in Reserve") these instructions: "I would suggest the advisability of when you have skinned this reservation," to move on quickly.¹¹ Shocking as his choice of words may be, they suggest a deeper understanding of Ward's feelings towards the Indigenous peoples to whom he was referring. While the act of skinning or scalping is not common amongst the Menominee in particular, his phrasing suggests the deeply held belief at the time of the "savages" and their violence. In this case, however, it is not the savage that is enacting brutality on others, but is rather the victim of the metaphorical bloodshed of institutional conquest.

Ward continued: "If there is no immediate danger of anybody coming into the region where you are at work, you can be more discriminating in what you acquire

than if you feel that somebody is likely to jump your claim at any moment.” Otherwise, Barrett should “buy as much as possible.”¹² In this case, it was neither the quality nor the significance of any specific object, but rather the sheer quantity wanted. Hoarding of sacred objects and grave goods was paramount to institutions who wrestled for prominence through their collections. Even the Smithsonian, arguably the most prominent museum in the United States, published a circular in 1861 calling for the collections to increase and noting difficulties and possible solutions. The circular notes “the jealousy with which [Indians] guard the remains of their friends renders such collection in most cases a difficult task, but there are others in which these objects can be procured without impropriety.”¹³ The circular also advised plunder of the graves of the friendless, slaves, and “Indians killed on the battlefield,” keeping in mind that “numerous tribes have become extinct” and so would prove no issue when taking these remains.¹⁴

Bloomfield and Omāēqnomenēweqnāēsewen: Collecting Language

Our bones were not the only things taken away and used. Arguably, one of the most defining characteristics of a community is the language in which they live their daily lives. For the Menominee, we see Omāēqnomenēweqnāēsewen (the Menominee language) as a living part of us; you cannot separate the language from life, as even its most basic tenets are based on animacy. Trees, rocks, and others are alive, and we navigate our relationship with the land around us by our relationships with these animate and inanimate things. Unfortunately, the federal government has run a very successful campaign of erasure and decimation against Indigenous languages of the Americas, and we have lost a great number. Indeed, in 1867, the federal Indian Peace Commission, appointed by President Grant, called for a policy of cultural and specifically linguistic erasure:

Through sameness of language is produced sameness of sentiment, and thought; customs and habits are molded and assimilated in the same way, and thus in process of time the differences producing trouble would have been gradually obliterated. . . . In the difference of language today lies two-thirds of our trouble. . . . Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted. (US Congress, 1868)¹⁵

In light of policies such as these, linguists—including Leonard Bloomfield, who recorded Omāēqnomenēweqnāēsewen between 1920 and 1921—were excited to document Indigenous languages before they “disappeared.” “Bloomfield, like Skinner (with whom he corresponded in the early 1920s) and Martin Hoffman before him, believed that Menominee culture was dying, which he saw happening through the language.”¹⁶ According to Bloomfield:

The Menomini are being rapidly made over into the cultural type of the uneducated white American; of that European American culture which, with its art and science, is worthy to stand beside their own and perhaps above it, they know

nothing. They are suffering, therefore, what can be regarded only as a cultural loss, and they are fully aware of this, bearing it with a wistful resignation. . . . Today, many Menomini children speak only the feeble English dialect, a thousand times bastardized by the standard language, which they receive from ignorant school-teachers and from the inhabitants of the surrounding countryside. The contrast is even more tragic in other respects, which lie beyond the scope of this book.¹⁷

After his visit and research trip to the reservation during the summers of 1920 and 1921, Bloomfield did not visit again. Instead, he would go on to write prolifically about Omāēqnomenēweqnāēsewen, but never rally the government on our behalf, or call to protect it from disappearing; rather, it was a study of interest insofar as one studies the anatomy of a cadaver. I would argue that more discourse has been had around Bloomfield's 1927 report on "literate and illiterate speech" than Bloomfield conducted himself. His critique of White-Thunder, a Menominee man whose "Menomini is atrocious. His vocabulary is small; his inflections are often barbarous; he constructs sentences on a few threadbare models. He may be said to speak no language tolerably," has sparked intense debate within the fields of socio-, racial-, and general linguistic circles, and has been the basis for several heated arguments within the field with some defending his assertions and others disapproving of them.¹⁸ Bloomfield's limited and misrepresented ideologies surrounding Omāēqnomenēweqnāēsewen have become nearly totemic within linguistics, even though his own exposure within my community was quite limited. Indeed, many linguists have published globally about Omāēqnomenēweqnāēsewen and have never gained the tribe's permission to do so, nor have they ever visited our home or spoken to our people. Instead, the phonology, morphology, and generative grammar of our living language is picked apart from afar, taking the breath from the life of our words. It is common for some Algonquian linguists to take a "highly circumscribed focus on phonology and morphology, as was typical of the Bloomfieldian structuralist period" and through today.¹⁹ Some of the works I allude to here have been published within the last twenty years by global linguists who have never contacted our tribe, according to my discussions with the Menominee Language and Culture Commission.

The Menominee are not alone in this sordid history of abuse. In modernity, questions of capitalizing on the documentation and distribution of lexicons and other language documentation of learning materials have come under fire for their capitalistic rather than humanistic agendas. As recently as 2022, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Nation voted to ban the Lakota Language Consortium from their lands after a white linguist took what data the tribe believed was to be used for creating language materials for the community and instead copyrighted them for his own profits. This linguist took countless videos, recordings, and other documents from the tribe and attempted to sell back their own data to the Lakota speakers.²⁰

Most people would be appalled today if they saw these practices happening, and rightly so. When reading these reports, I often found myself asking if these unscrupulous individuals had ever stopped to think about what they wrote, how they stole, and if they slept well at night. Which brings us to our first main discussion: as a present

day Menominee language activist, I wonder if the actions of these scientists are seen as morally or ethically wrong in the eyes of their respective communities (anthropology, linguistics, etc.), or were these individuals just seen as enacting science by any means possible. Furthermore, I question whether or not there is a difference.

Ethics and Morality

As an officer in the United States Navy, I knew the difference between ethics and morality; I taught it to my sailors and recruits, and I tried to live an ethically and morally sound life. It wasn't until entering into the field of social science that my rigid idea of the difference between the two was so starkly pronounced. While I understood ethics to be the laws by which society deemed something right or wrong, and morals to be one's innate sense of right or wrong based on life experiences, this is not what I found. Instead, the consensus I found was that *there was no consensus*. I attributed this to my newness in the field and that I was simply too lacking in my personal library to fully understand; perhaps I had missed it, and I needed to look harder.

On further review, however, I found that I was not alone.

Although many would argue there is a distinct divergence between ethics and morals, "wherein the former is said to pertain to individual conduct and the latter to a system of collective rules, norms, and codes," this has not always been the case.²¹ Indeed, Keane acknowledges that as he began to work broadly within the tradition of ethics and anthropology—within which, understandings of ethics are thought to arise within interaction, not prior to interaction—he "discovered that there is no consistency in how they [social scientists] use the words morality and ethics, which are often requiring no definition at all."²² One must wonder, then, how can a system based on the observation and study of peoples have no true definitions of ethics and morality? Social science academics pride ourselves as being outward-looking, basing our systems on these principles, and in treating other humans with dignity and respect—or at least this is what we currently teach our undergrads and show to the world when asked. I was bothered by the lack of standardization of ethics and morality. But more than that—as an Indigenous person forced, constantly, to read about history through the eyes of the academic conqueror rather than the words of my ancestors—I was distressed that at no point had the academy sought to sanction the works of these deracinate-minded scientists, nor to question whether their actions were moral or ethical.

When trying to reconcile these thoughts, I was driven to question why these past scientists could not have seen the wrong they committed, but Martin Hoffman writes that "a person's prosocial moral structure is internalized when he or she accepts and feels obligated to abide by it without regard to external sanctions."²³ While morality and ethics are often hot topics of conversation around religious studies and the law, in science they are often seen as simply hurdles one must field in the forms of institutional review boards and red tape. But are there any true litmus tests for morality or ethics within social sciences that legitimately hold individual contributors accountable?

At least within the field of anthropology, specifically (and being a linguistic anthropologist, I tend to fall soundly within this group),

any public moral system for anthropology remains an informal one where, within limits, anthropologists can disagree with each other on what behavior counts as morally acceptable professional behavior. This means that, except for mandatory review by institutional review boards, each anthropologist determines for himself/herself what is morally acceptable behavior. Thus, any imagined public moral system in anthropology exists mostly as a self-imposed, self-regulated set of ideas of ethics.²⁴

At the time of most of these collections, however unfortunate it may be, Indigenous peoples and communities were not afforded full protection under the law when it came to human rights. Indeed, we did not even gain full US citizenship until 1924 with the passing of the Indian Citizenship Act. For these scientists, then, we were not seen as equal. One could argue that, even in the face of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 and the Native American Languages Act (NALA) of the same year, we are still not granted, even today, full protection under the law like other groups, as our legislation often lacks teeth and force. The cold truth is that, throughout the time of collections, we were not seen as Americans, and “by the time the social sciences were standardized in degree-granting departments, non-Western areas and peoples were thought to be fundamentally different in both essence and in practice.”²⁵ As such, Indigenous peoples were seen as outside the bounds of proprietary scientific collection methods that would otherwise be imposed on Western acquisitions because we “could not be known through the same scientific procedures or subjected to the same rules of management. At the same time, the desire to know and manage [us] had increased.”²⁶

With this knowledge in mind, then, it is conceivably safe to say that these earlier scientists did not see their actions as immoral or unethical, in large part due to the fact that “moral anthropology deals with how moral questions are posed and addressed, or symmetrically, how nonmoral questions are rephrased as moral.”²⁷ While many today would see the error in this thinking, all one must do is reframe an immoral or unethical act in a dehumanizing worldview—which seems to be highly endorsed by the data that Indigenous individuals were not even citizens, nor were they granted the same rights as the scientists of that period. Even today, “we [anthropologists] are predominantly white, mostly men, and we think and talk as the Westerners we are. When we do this uncritically, we run the risk of dehumanizing—as treating as something less than fully human—the people we study, and in some real ways, their descendants, and even one other. That is not just boring. It is harmful in the same way, if not with the same ferocity, that dehumanizing racism and misogyny cause real harm.”²⁸

It is conceivable that these individuals simply did not need to war within their own ethical or moral frameworks to find the wriggle room. For these researchers, they didn’t think they were doing anything wrong, because they saw science as of the utmost importance, and Indigenous individuals as subjects to be studied. To put it simply, we were not people—our bodies and our cultures were simply an item to be collected and put on a shelf. We were the reason exhibits were opening and drawing crowds, getting people interested in science and making names for the researchers. Indeed, “anthropology

did not create the savage. Rather, the savage was the *raison d'être* of anthropology.”²⁹ As scholar Nancy Scheper-Hughes asserts, “The practice of anthropology was guided by a complex form of modern pessimism rooted in anthropology’s tortured relationship to the colonial world and its ruthless destruction of Native lands and peoples.”³⁰ The issues with the morality and ethics behind anthropology and the linguistic study of Indigenous individuals is deeply rooted in colonial understandings and settler ideals, and until addressed fully and unabashedly, they cannot be disentangled.³¹

PERMANENT MARGINALITY: MY PATH

Positionality (Because It’s Always Important)

My positionality within Indigenous spaces is neither unique nor is it always very clear; to be wholly transparent, I am a descendant member of my nation, the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin. Although it is not my intent to go into great detail here about blood quantum and the politics behind it, I must mention it nonetheless to describe my own position inside and outside of academia, as many have very distinct feelings on the matter due to the recent rise of “Pretendians” and “Descendians” in recent years. As a person who occupies this space, it is important to address the question of belonging to a specific group, especially when dealing with the concept of whether one has a right to certain cultural information, and if our voices are representative of our nations and communities, or that of academia alone. In order to criticize the theft my community has experienced, I believe it important to address the historical context of belonging (legally) to a community, as well as finding one’s place within it (personally).

Tribes in the United States are bound by membership, first described in the Dawes Act of 1887, which allotted tribal lands to tribal members; this act forced tribes to decide who was and was not a member, something that had otherwise not been commonplace among most Indigenous communities. With the passing of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, tribes were given the authority to set membership rolls on specific requirements; some tribes based their requirements upon lineal descent (proving that a person has an unbroken line of descent from a specific point in time) or blood quantum (their percentage of “Indian blood”).

My tribe follows blood quantum, and for full enrollment, an individual must be one-quarter Menominee to be a fully enrolled member. By Menominee Tribal Ordinance Chapter 46, I am a first-degree descendant, and I have rights and privileges as such, though not the full rights of an enrolled person; what is more important, I have the right to call myself *omāeqnomeniahkiw* (Menominee woman). Unfortunately, not all tribes allow nonenrolled members (those that do not meet blood quantum or lineal descent) such rights, nor do they recognize their children and descendants as belonging to the tribe. This is not true for all, but has the consequence of further marginalizing communities and individuals. Happily, my nation allows descendants a place in our community—we are even allowed to run for Menominee Tribal Powwow Royalty, so that we may represent our nation. While the issues surrounding tribal enrollment are varied and complex, and outside the scope of this specific paper, it is important nonetheless to state that there are contentions within the Indigenous community

surrounding the issues of membership and whether an individual does or does not have an enrollment number. The discussion behind internalized colonization and blood quantum is certainly one that many other experts have written on at length.³²

Personally, I have always struggled with my own blood quantum, especially growing up in Phoenix. With such a strong non-Menominee Indigenous community surrounding me, I felt more like an imposter than anything. Phenotypically, I have been miscategorized by others as anything *but* Native. It has been an incredibly difficult place to belong, knowing that on paper I am Menominee and have a certificate of degree of Indian blood (but not enough for some people), that I am allowed rights and privileges by my tribe (but felt like a charlatan when I tried to take up space in an Indigenous domain), and that my family has faced assimilation and tragedy (but I physically resemble those that carried out these acts). Being a linguistic anthropologist with weak physical resemblance to her heritage, I understand that I am more accessible and palatable to others in my field who may harbor unvoiced biases; meanwhile, this sometimes inhibits my ability to connect with Indigenous researchers. It was not until I started my fieldwork for my master's degree in linguistics and was able to come back to my reservation to work with the Menominee Language and Culture Commission that I truly started to heal. Although it's an ongoing battle that I face, it's a start. My husband, my tribe's only linguist and a fluent Omãeqnomenēweqnãēsewen speaker, told me something when we first met that healed a bit of my fractured self-perception; when speaking about blood quantum and how I felt like a fraud in this space, he quietly and firmly said, "Your soul was born Menominee, you're Menominee. That's all that matters."

I am not alone in feeling this way, though I think discussions about others who are on the outskirts of their tribal nations gathering to discuss our struggles with colonized methods of enrollment and belonging feels more taboo than anything—but why? Even for those that are fully enrolled, the idea of being a "true" tribal member, of being "enough," is laced with historical and intergenerational trauma. Scholar Sheilah E. Nicholas related an anecdote in which an older speaker of Hopi posed a question to a Hopi youth: "How are you Hopi if you can't speak it [the Hopi language]?" The youth responded with this assertion: "I live Hopi, I just don't speak it."³³ While some may speak Hopi, that doesn't mean they live the Hopi way of life; just because some may speak English doesn't mean they aren't living their Indigenous way of life. *Belonging* goes deeper than language and looks, and the connection to one's past is paramount.

Using the Past to Heal the Future

With this in mind, my work academically has been focused almost entirely on the work of linguists and anthropologists who have been extractive and harmful to my own community as well as to the larger Indigenous community of the Americas. I have based a good portion of my linguistic information on Bloomfield, whose work is quoted almost symmetrically with Omãeqnomenēweqnãēsewen.³⁴ Indeed, one could argue he made his career and name off it. But I've been asking myself: how does one reconcile the fact that, in order to make one's name in the field, these older researchers must be credited once more?

Through my past and current research, I have found that often what's written is not always the truth; the façade of perfect academia came crumbling down, and I began to truly shake off the blind obsequious faith in the Western written word I'd learned in undergraduate school. I embraced a questioning attitude, and listened to the stories of my people. It was enlightening, to hear stories of how some *omāēqnomenēw* (Menominee person) had outright lied to Bloomfield and subsequent linguists and anthropologists. Some stories I heard made me laugh so hard I snorted. In one such story from the mid-1950s and '60s, a tribal member spoke to anthropologists telling them how aliens had visited; they had sprouted tails and used them to bore into the ground so they could sit cross-legged in midair while speaking to the *Omāēqnomenēw*. Afterward, he ran back to his family and his gathering places and made jokes, saying things like, "You'll never guess what I just told this *mōhkomān* (white person)! And they even *paid* me for it while they scribbled it down the whole time!" Whether or not the anthropologists believed them (and sadly I have yet to find any evidence they ever published these tales), the number of these stories I've heard within my own community is both heartwarming and somewhat celebratory. While, as an anthropologist, I hope for veracity in publication, as an Indigenous researcher I feel some small amount of joy in knowing that my ancestors had a sense of humor in the face of everything.

Obviously, this is not always the case; nonetheless, it has given me the opportunity to critically read some of these published works with an evaluative eye. For example, Bloomfield professed in some of his work that he "was surprised to find that, despite his own relatively slight acquaintance with the language, he was able to share in the judgements that native speakers made," and that he was "able to make the same judgments that Menomini community members make."³⁵ He was confident that his language abilities were quite high—especially for someone who was only in the community for two summer trips (1920 and 1921). But the *Omāēqnomeniahkiw* have been taught what Bloomfield would never have paid attention to. To illustrate: in his journal article "Literate and Illiterate Speech," Bloomfield found that "difficulty using the obviative inflection and failure to use the quotative verb form in storytelling are described as failings of the 'bad' Menomini speaker, but are not linked specifically with younger speakers."³⁶ However, storytelling in our community has a sociocultural requirement that Bloomfield either was not aware of or did not note: that, by tradition, only older men are storytellers and will use the correct linguistic devices for such—and that it is inappropriate for others to do so. From this, I am beginning to understand that "as a researcher in my own community, I was not only *epistemologically privileged* but *involved*" (emphasis in original).³⁷

There are critiques of Bloomfield and his work, especially among members of my community, for writing his varied opinions on *Omāēqnomenēweqnāēsewen*. One critique is especially poignant, with Paul Kroskrity and Margaret Field pointing to the bias within the social science field: "the dismissal of language ideologies as a kind of folk awareness was standard policy in both anthropology and linguistics" due to the beliefs of such scholars as Franz Boas and Bloomfield, in that they lacked accuracy and did not possess the required scientific authority—an issue that many Indigenous communities still face today in legitimizing their stories and histories.³⁸

The Indigenous worldview has remained under fire from the first collection of goods and written words in this country, but many do not understand that “language ideologies are thus grounded in the social distribution of both Indigenous social inequality and the differential impact of colonial and postcolonial contact experiences.”³⁹

Physical artifacts and sacred goods have also been held hostage within institutions due to this attitude of Indigenous worldviews not being as important as Western views. Even with the introduction of NAGPRA, social scientists have used this legislation to argue that Indigenous groups are forcing religious views on science and impeding their work. The irony of this is not lost on any of us. Without our religious and funerary objects, as well as burials, there would be no research. Indeed, for my own nation, “Skinner persuaded individuals to sell their possessions so that they could be stored in the ‘sacred place’ to which other Menominee sacred items had gone.”⁴⁰ Many of the objects that were sold or given to anthropologists were under the guise of being held in a sacred location, kept safe for the future. The ideas of repatriation of these items have given rise to a large outcry from academics throughout the years, who “collectively saw repatriation as the triumph of religion over science—the victory of irrational beliefs in a ‘demon-haunted world’” and that the “repatriation debate was just the creationism-evolution debate veiled in buckskin.”⁴¹

As recently as 2021, Elizabeth Weiss, a former curator of Indigenous skeletal remains at San Jose State University, authored *Repatriation and Erasing the Past*, an inflammatory title to many, as well as tweeting things such as this:⁴²



The arguments for these collections across the globe to stay within the institutions and not return them to the Indigenous communities from whence they came all have a very similar story line: without Western institutions, Indigenous communities never would have been able to maintain their own history. In fact, “we in museums have cared for them and preserved them,” James Van Stone, a curator at the Field Museum, once argued, “and without our efforts they might have been lost.”⁴³ In addition: “[Scholars] argued that if anthropologists hadn’t collected so much, then most of Indian material culture would have been destroyed. They worried that repatriation would empty museums, ruining one of Western society’s great institutions.”⁴⁴ Reading these statements makes one question whether or not these scholars had any idea that if they had not stolen so many objects or bought them from people facing starvation and other horrors, would Indigenous communities have lost so much now? If it was not for the predatory practices of the past, may we not have saved and stored our own goods for our futures?

The strongest argument for these scholars is that Indigenous groups simply don’t support science, and that we’re too emotional. This narrative is neither new nor is it original, but “as seen in the case of the Havasupai, researchers, as well as respected scientific journals, grossly mischaracterized the complainants’ reaction as ‘hysterical’ and ‘hypersensitive’ and portrayed the case as groundless. This response problematically exemplified the notion that opposition to a particular use of samples, such as those at issue, necessarily stems from an antisience attitude without rational merit, rather than a legitimate, albeit different, standpoint.”⁴⁵ For far too long, “Native Americans were outsiders to their own heritage, as scientists and curators were entrusted to decide the fate of their material culture.”⁴⁶ However, I argue that now we have the ability and the responsibility to change the narrative and the future for our children.

Indigenous Agents

In his book *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America’s Culture*, Chip Colwell tells of a group of Cheyenne who traveled to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington, to reclaim ancestral remains from the Sand Creek Massacre.⁴⁷ Colwell relates how a woman, Connie Hart Yellowman, picked up the skull of a young girl in her trembling hands: “The top of the girl’s head was bashed, looking to Yellowman like a saber wound. She kissed the girl’s skull and held it for a moment before placing it into the pine casket. “*Naevahoo’ohtseme*,” she told her ancestor in the Cheyenne language. “We are going back home.”⁴⁸ I openly wept, reading that passage. I wept again when Yellowman responds to a query with “I just wanted to hold the remains, because she had never been held for years. The girl has just been sitting alone in a vault drawer for more than a century. ‘She needed and deserved affection.’”⁴⁹ How often science and its followers forget that these remains were once children and adults; they lived, loved, and died—and their bones are reminders of our own humanity and mortality. Instead, anthropologists look to people like Boas, who was quoted as having said, “It is most unpleasant work to steal bones from a grave, but what is the use, someone has to do it.”⁵⁰ These stories

of people's lives that have otherwise been forgotten are important not only to science but to those of us who are left behind to piece together our histories, which have been undeniably changed by the hands of others.

My presence in anthropology is anomalous, and sometimes it even needs explaining to those within my own field. I have been approached by professors and classmates alike, asked questions as if I was a pillar for my community and a voice for *all* Indigenous communities. On one hand, it's internalized within me because I have fought to be Menominee and am proud of it; on the other, the social dimension, it's a destabilizing effect on the discipline because I exist in this space. My identity is uncomfortably unavoidable and visible now, and I am learning to navigate that every day. I am not alone in this, because "the numbers of Indigenous anthropologists remain small. Their presence at the anthropologists' table is particularly valuable for their 'Native' perspective on knowledge, practical applied development projects, human rights, and anthropological ethics."⁵¹

Not only that, but I am of mixed heritage, and blood quantum still has a mighty grasp on many Indigenous nations—my own included—as well as Indigenous thoughts of belonging and acceptance. Who am I to speak to being an Indigenous anthropologist, when I've heard jokes pointed toward others (and knowing it could fit me), such as "If you cut them and they bleed, they'd lose their tribal status, right off the rolls!" This concept of being allowed to be a member of one's community and an anthropologist is often a difficult thing to bear, and as Narayan says,

For those of us who are mixed, the darker element in our ancestry serves to define us with or without our own complicity. The fact that we are often distanced—by factors as varied as education, class, or emigration—from the societies we are supposed to represent tends to be underplayed. Furthermore, it is only appropriate (and this may be the result of our own identity quests) that, sooner or later, we will study the exotic societies with which we are associated. . . . "Native" anthropologists, then, are perceived as insiders, regardless of their complex backgrounds.⁵²

The truth is that I am an Indigenous person who grew up away from my culture. Until recently, I found myself in what I like to call the cultural diaspora: I was not only geographically displaced from my tribe, I was not allowed (due to assimilationist policies and intergenerational trauma) to learn and be a part of my own culture.⁵³ However, one thing that anthropologists of the past did not account for was descendants of their subjects reclaiming and taking over the field. These past researchers took our stories, our sacred ceremonies, our objects and bones, and promised that they would put them in safekeeping for the future—all while not really intending to do any such thing.

In the opening pages of the volume he eventually published on the Menominee, Hoffman claimed he began the project at the request of several Menominee elders, including Neopit. Knowing that he had recently studied the Ojibwa Mitawin, they asked him to be initiated into the Menominee Mitawin "in order that their version of the traditions and dramatized forms of initiation could be studied and preserved 'for the information of future generations of the Menomini.'" The elders believed these skills were being lost because younger members of the tribe lacked interest. Hoffman

believed his work would help to preserve the rites for future generations. Smithsonian Institution annual reports, however, stated that he visited the Menominee for the purpose of making a comparative study of the Menominee and Ojibwa Mitawin. This would serve academic rather than Menominee purposes.⁵⁴

I live and study in a precarious marginal space, one that obligates me to follow practices of ruthless anthropologists and linguists of the past; however, because of their work, I am granted an opportunity to reclaim my heritage. It is an interesting and sometimes uncomfortable position to be in, knowing that I owe a debt to the extractive and exploitative researchers of the past, who I have shown to have dehumanized Indigenous peoples in a bid to justify their work, so that I may feel a connection to my heritage. Gloria Morgan, a member of the Tejon Indian Tribe in Kern County, California, another woman who was not afforded the ability to grow up within her culture, spoke with scholar Mike Anton and told him that J. P. Harrington's collection contained the voice of her great-grandmother.⁵⁵ While helping to computerize Harrington's collection, Morgan was able to hear her great-grandmother singing in Kitanemuk—a language that at the time had no fluent speakers—and to learn of ceremonies and traditions long lost due to assimilation and erasure. Morgan stated that through Harrington's collection, she learned "a hundred little things that wouldn't mean anything to anyone . . . except if you're a Tejon."⁵⁶ Morgan and I are not singularities learning from these cruel histories, nor are we the only ones taking back a part of ourselves. Tribes in California have used Harrington's work to try to "establish federal tribal recognition, settle territorial claims, and protect sacred sites from development."⁵⁷ Using Harrington's work has, for many, created "an emotionally vivid sense of coevalness" with ancestors, that otherwise would have been lost.⁵⁸

While growing up in Phoenix, the only time I got to see Menominee beadwork or art was in a museum. Living in Chicago in my late twenties, starting on my MA thesis, I heavily read and relied upon the works of Skinner, Bloomfield, Keesing, and Hoffman. Through their words, I found my way back home. While I don't think it was their intent, in the very long run of things their work has returned at least one Menominee soul back to the forests of her ancestors. I am indebted to them, but I am not *beholden* to them.

As an Indigenous researcher, it is my duty to tell the story of my ancestors and to treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve. While "sacred items taken into museums were and sometimes still are displayed publicly, which is against their intended use," it is my duty to speak for these items, to ensure that they are no longer alone and shown to ogling crowds.⁵⁹ It is true that "the fearless spectator is accountable to 'science'; the witness is accountable to history. Anthropologists as witnesses are accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations."⁶⁰ As an anthropologist who has recently begun her journey to finding and claiming her indigeneity, I have struggled to sometimes learn where the line is—between being afforded full academic access and taking a step back to respect the sacred. Just because information exists does not mean it should—or can—be consumed by all. My journey has been one of decolonizing my mind, something I can openly admit is quite challenging.

As others have discovered before me, the process of reclaiming heritage may be quite difficult. Sometimes what we have learned in the Western world clashes with the traditional mores to which we have not otherwise been exposed. I would venture to guess that unlearning the entitlement of Western academia (the constant need to have questions answered simply because questions exist) and, in turn, learning to slow down and to understand that answers come when—and if—they are meant to, is not an easy path for many. The difference between Western and Indigenous knowledge systems is one not simply of ability and access, but of respect for the teacher and the seeker.

Since the first time I stood in front of the case at the Heard and felt the whisper of the Woodlands calling to me, I knew I was not alone. These objects stuck in drawers, left in boxes or dictionaries, floating around, covered in dust with sacred words, are the products of thousands of years of my peoples' history, and I owe it to them to right the wrongs. While anthropologists and linguists have gotten the acclaim and recognition for their work on Indigenous groups for centuries, it is our stories that they tell, our bones that they study, and our histories they hoard. But a new wave of Indigenous researchers is coming through the ranks, and regardless of tribal affiliation, blood quantum, or the languages we speak, we all embody Indigenous survivance. Our existence is an act of resistance, and we have the might of our ancestors behind us.

NOTES

1. Juli Kearns, "To Phoenix and the Heard Museum," *Idyllopus Press Presents* (October 9, 2005), idyllopuspress.com/meanwhile/590/to-phoenix-and-the-heard-museum/.
2. Robert E. Moore, "Disappearing, Inc.: Glimpsing the Sublime in the Politics of Access to Endangered Languages," *Language and Communication* 26, nos. 3–4 (2006): 296–315, 301.
3. For further reference, compare to Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
4. *Ibid.*, 306.
5. Tristan Almazan and Sarah Coleman, "George Amos Dorsey: A Curator and His Comrades," *Fieldiana: Anthropology* 36 (2003): 87–97.
6. David R. M. Beck, "Collecting among the Menomini: Cultural Assault in Twentieth-Century Wisconsin," *American Indian Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2010): 157–93.
7. *Ibid.*, 167.
8. *Ibid.*, 163, 166.
9. Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*.
10. Beck, "Collecting among the Menomini," 171.
11. Henry Ward to Samuel Barrett, July 20, 1910, *Letterbook* 25, Milwaukee Public Museum correspondence, MPM Archives; cited in Beck, "Collecting among the Menomini," 157–93.
12. *Ibid.*, 164.
13. Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 213.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Paul V. Kroskrity and Margaret C. Field, eds., *Native American Language Ideologies: Beliefs, Practices, and Struggles in Indian Country* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009).
16. Beck, "Collecting among the Menomini," 173.

17. Leonard Bloomfield, "Literate and Illiterate Speech," *American Speech* 2, no. 10 (1927): 432–39.
18. Ibid., 437.
19. Kroskrity and Field, *Native American Language Ideologies*, 199.
20. Graham Lee Brewer, "Lakota Elders Helped a White Man Preserve Their Language. Then He Tried to Sell It Back to Them," *NBC News* (June 3, 2022).
21. Saba Mahmood, "Ethics and Piety," *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. Didier Fassin (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 221–41.
22. Webb Keane, *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 17.
23. Martin L. Hoffman, "Empathy and Moral Development," *The Annual Report of Educational Psychology in Japan* 35 (1996): 157–62; cited in Webb Keane, *Ethical Life*.
24. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, "Anthropology and Ethics," *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. Didier Fassin (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 103–14.
25. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2003).
26. Ibid., 19.
27. Didier Fassin, ed., *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. Didier Fassin (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012).
28. Bonnie L. Pitblado, "On Rehumanizing Pleistocene People of the Western Hemisphere," *American Antiquity* 87, no. 2 (2022): 217–35.
29. Trouillot, *Anthropology and the Savage Slot*, 28.
30. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 3 (1995): 409–40.
31. Some Indigenous researchers call for a total reimagining and/or destruction of existing academic systems; for more information on this, please refer to the theory of pyroepistemology. While not currently suggested in this work, the theory may be of interest to readers in Indigenous fields of study.
32. For more detailed reading, please see James W. Oberly's book review "The Great Vanishing Act: Blood Quantum and the Future of Native Nations, ed. by Kathleen Ratteree and Norbert Hill Jr.," *Great Plains Research* 31, no. 1 (2021): 120–21.
33. Sheilah E. Nicholas, "How Are You Hopi If You Can't Speak It?: An Ethnographic Study of Language as Cultural Practice among Contemporary Hopi Youth," in *Ethnography and Language Policy*, ed. Teresa L. McCarty (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 69–92.
34. I have also used the work of Monica Macaulay, a linguist who now works with my tribe with an intimate and positive relationship toward healing relations and researching Omāēqnomenēweqnāēsewen in order to give it to the future.
35. Nancy C. Dorian, "Age and Speaker Skills in Receding Languages: How Far Do Community Evaluations and Linguists' Evaluations Agree?" *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (2009): 11–25, 18; greater discussion on the subject may be found in Jane H. Hill, "Expert Rhetorics in Advocacy for Endangered Languages: Who Is Listening, and What Do They Hear?" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 12, no. 2 (2002): 119–33.
36. Jane H. Hill, "Expert Rhetorics," 19.
37. Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996): 1–288; cited in Nicholas, "How Are You Hopi If You Can't Speak It?"
38. Kroskrity and Field, *Native American Language Ideologies*, 4; for more information, see K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty, *To Remain an Indian: Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006); Teresa L. McCarty,

Mary Eunice Romero, and Ofelia Zepeda, "Reclaiming the Gift: Indigenous Youth Counternarratives on Native Language Loss and Revitalization," *American Indian Quarterly* 30, nos. 1 and 2 (2006): 28–48; K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Jeffrey Ostler, "Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt: Cultural Genocide and Native Liberation in an Era of Racial Oppression," *Journal of American Indian Education* 57, no. 1 (2018): 79–100.

39. Kroskrity and Field, *Native American Language Ideologies*, 6.

40. Beck, "Collecting among the Menomini," 167.

41. Geoffrey A. Clark, "NAGPRA, Science, and the Demon-Haunted World," *Skeptical Inquirer* 23 (1999): 44; cited in Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*; Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 81.

42. Elizabeth Weiss, posted meme, Twitter (August 31, 2021, 2:47 p.m.), <https://x.com/eweissunburied/status/1432792224270483461>.

43. Anne S. Canfield, "Ahayu:da: Art or Icon?" *Native Arts* (1980); cited in Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*.

44. Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 80.

45. Katherine Drabiak-Syed, "Lessons from Havasupai Tribe v. Arizona State University Board of Regents: Recognizing Group, Cultural, and Dignity Harms as Legitimate Risks Warranting Integration into Research Practice," *Journal of Health and Biomedical Law* 6 (2010): 175.

46. Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 108.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., 93.

49. Ibid., 95.

50. Ibid., 205.

51. Fluehr-Lobban, "Anthropology and Ethics," 108.

52. Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993): 671–86.

53. Rachelle M. Edwards, *Reclaiming Indigenous Power through Prepubescent First Language Acquisition Revitalization in Menominee* (Chicago: Northeastern Illinois University, 2022).

54. Beck, "Collecting among the Menomini," 160.

55. Mike Anton, "A Packrat's Path to Indian Past," *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 2004, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-jul-02-me-harrington2-story.html>; cited in Moore "Disappearing, Inc.," 296–15.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Moore "Disappearing, Inc.," 309.

59. Beck, "Collecting among the Menomini," 181.

60. Scheper-Hughes, "The Primacy of the Ethical, 419.

