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Restorative Survey of a Human Osteological Teaching collection: Mitigating objectification and Structural Violence After Death

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ABSTRACT

Interdisciplinary discussions considering the impacts of dubious acquisition and management of human skeletal collections have identified these assemblages as venues for perpetuating structural violence after death. Lack of provenance across many large and small “legacy” skeletal collections prevents clear solutions for treatment of individuals who cannot be clearly associated with descendant communities or identified as donors. A critical examination of our department’s collection and classroom presentation practices as they pertain to the individuals in the Human Osteological Teaching Collection (HOTC) serves to mitigate this violence and restore a degree of personhood to the individuals who contribute to generations of education. The individuals (n=6) were assessed for presence and preservation of individual skeletal elements; osteometric data was then collected according to methodological standards. Each individual was morphologically evaluated to generate estimations for phenotypic sex and skeletal age. Finally, visual assessments of pathological lesions and taphonomy were conducted on a presence/absence basis and noted in the inventory forms. Morphological ancestry or “racial” estimations were excluded from this study, as they are rooted in and perpetuate the false idea of race as a biological phenomenon. Our results reflect a typical profile across the HOTC individuals: middle- to olderadult (35-50+) males, displaying one or more pathological lesion and one or more instance of postmortem skeletal damage. These results reflect the issues of objectification and structural violence identified across other osteological collections and highlight the importance of presenting skeletal teaching collections with a focus on care and ethical treatment of marginalized individuals.

KEYWORDS: Anthropology, Bioarcheology, Ethics, Social justice, Collections