

TCETHR Listening Session Protocol

Introductions:

In establishing the Commission for the Ethical Treatment of Human Remains, the AAA has responded to an urgent call across the field of anthropology for institutional and professional accountability related to human remains in education and research collections, with special attention to standards and guidelines concerning the respectful care for all human remains (including osteological and genetic), as well as graves and grave goods. This specifically includes but is not limited to, African Americans and Native Americans that are housed in research collections at museums and academic institutions. The Commission will review and assess the current status of legislative, policy, and professional society standards and guidelines as well as the ethical, legal, social, and scientific issues involved in order to eliminate the gap between the current status and model standards of institutional and professional accountability, through Listening Sessions in the US and beyond. Our members' affiliations span bioarchaeology, forensics, archaeology, anatomy, museology and cultural anthropology.

We are:

[Michael L. Blakey](#) (cochair), National Endowment for the Humanities Professor of Anthropology, Africana Studies, and American Studies, Director of the Institute for Historical Biology, College of William & Mary.

[Deborah A. Thomas](#) (cochair), R. Jean Brownlee Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania

[Sabrina C. Agarwal](#), Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley.

[Thomas H. Champney](#), Professor of Cell Biology and Anatomy in the Department of Cell Biology, Miller School of Medicine, University of Miami.

[Carlina de la Cova](#), Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina.

[Debra L. Martin](#), Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas.

[Kisha Supernant](#), Director, Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archaeology, Codirector of the Situated Knowledges: Indigenous Peoples and Place (SKIPP) Signature Area, and Professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta.

[Rachel Watkins](#), Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at American University.

[Terrance Weik](#), Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina.

Natalie Konopinski (AAA staff liaison), Editor of [*Anthropology News*](#) at the American Anthropological Association.

GENERAL ADVISORS: Neil Tashima and Cathleen Crain; Autumn Rain

Advisory Panel of Anthropological Geneticists: Jada Benn Torres, Ripan Malhi, Krystal Tsosie, Kelly Blevins

Mission:

As a result of the Commission's work, we will draft an AAA policy to guide anthropologists, museums, and other institutions in how to ethically and respectfully handle human remains, burial places and belongings from burials by engaging with lineal descendants, ancestral communities, descendant communities, and communities of care (understanding that not all communities of care have the same relationships to ancestors).

Values:

Our values encompass the following: Care, ancestor respect and dignity, justice, restoration, reciprocity, collaboration, autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and accountability.

Preamble:

We members of the Commission recognize that the treatment of human remains by scientists and educators is troubled by a dilemma which might be described as a conflict between the human need to know and the human need of dignity. The human body has been explored anatomically, certainly since the European Renaissance. Modern medicine would not exist without knowledge obtained by human dissection; anthropological understandings of our common origins and biological diversity, for better and worse, have required the observation of biological evidence. On the other hand, funerary rites including sacred burials of the dead have characterized humanity since the dawn of our species. The marking of human dignity by memorialization is a *specific* trait encompassing all religions and none. All human cultures practice memorialization of their ancestors. Religious systems and family observances everywhere demonstrate the deep care all people have for the stewardship of the dead and objection to its neglect.

Therefore, the ill-treatment of the dead, as descendants and others define it, bears the possibility of social and psychological harm. It then becomes an ethical mandate for anthropologists committed to averting harm to those with whom we work. We are here to listen to your ideas and concerns that will inform our discussion of revised ethical standards and best practices for those conducting research on cemeteries, museum collections, and samples of human remains; to bridge or resolve our simultaneous need for knowledge and dignity.

Vision:

Our Vision is that all anthropologists treat all human remains with respect and justice.

Questions for Listening Session:

What do human remains mean to you?

What concerns do you have regarding the treatment of human remains and related materials?

How should researchers, curators, and educators engage with descendant communities? What is your understanding of who is part of descendant communities?

What does collaboration with communities mean? What kinds of collaborations seem possible to you?

What are the contexts in which research could be performed on human remains, or with samples of tissue and blood? What are the contexts in which research should not (or never) be performed on human remains, or with samples of tissue and blood? What is the appropriate body for making these decisions?

What other concerns do you have regarding the ethical treatment of human remains?