



GUEST COMMENTARY: NO STONE UNTURNED

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A prefatory note from the editorial collective. When the Society for Cultural Anthropology selected our distributed, international editorial collective to lead Cultural Anthropology, they did so in part to support our commitment to opening channels of this crucial platform of our discipline beyond the scope of privileged, endowed higher educational institutions in the United States. As one step of this process, in this issue we provide space to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma to describe their work since the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990. As Deanna L. Byrd, the NAGPRA Liaison-Coordinator and Research and Outreach Program Manager of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, and Ian Thompson, the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, writes, since that time, “Native American communities gained a measure of say in how ancestral burials are treated on federal lands. The law also established a mechanism to help Native American, Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian communities have open dialogue with institutions across the country about the return of their ancestors, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony.” Please read the rest of their guest commentary to learn more.

Choctaw people thrived for thousands of years in our homeland, what is now the southeastern United States, spreading from portions of western Alabama, the panhandle of Florida, and Mississippi. Deep cultural ties to the land, knowledge, and lifeways were passed from generation to generation. Through time, Choctaw communities shared this landscape with other Muskogean-language speaking Tribes and developed relationships far beyond the southeast region through trade networks, the negotiation of hunting grounds, and exploration. These relationships remain today in recognition of this long history.

As European expansion encroached on Choctaw homelands, a series of land cessions slowly forced Choctaw people to move to the interior of Mississippi or west into Louisiana. Beginning with the Treaty of Mobile in 1765, in just forty-seven years the Choctaw ceded the vast majority of their land to the United States. Millions of acres were relinquished, ending with the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830 as part of the Indian Removal Act. This treaty set in motion the Removal period for Choctaw people to land west of the Mississippi River in Indian Territory, or what is now the state of Oklahoma.

As the first Tribe removed by the federal government, the Choctaw people faced merciless peril through disorganization and mismanagement. Some members stayed in Mississippi and make up one of our sister Tribes, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI), while others migrated west into Louisiana, joining our second sister Tribe, the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians. Beginning in 1831, most Choctaw people, however, left to Indian Territory and endured hardships, displacement, loss of generational knowledge, and death, the consequences of which still impact our community. The Choctaw Removal period lasted more than seventy-five years, ending with later removals to Indian Territory in 1903. Today, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Tribal membership comprises more than 200,000 descendants of these brave Choctaw who journeyed westward along the Trail of Tears and Death, what would later become known as the Trail of Tears. Our reservation sits in the southeastern portion of Oklahoma, with a land base spreading across ten and a half counties. While each community within our reservation is unique, we all share pride in our culture, history, and language.

Choctaw people have deep respect for our loved ones, something that also finds expression in the care for and preparation of an individual after their passing. Through history, burial ceremonies have included bundling, basket burials, scaffolding, charnel houses, burials near and under the home, grave houses, and modern methods of internment, to name a few. The specific form of these ceremonies has varied widely in our community, from district to district, from family

to family. Traditions were adopted, faded away, and later revitalized. No single burial practice existed among our community, but it has always been a sacred responsibility to not only remember our ancestors but also to protect their resting places. For more than a hundred years, removed Choctaws were unable to protect ancestors' burial grounds against excavation and looting. As Choctaw leader George Harkins wrote in his "Letter to the American People" of 1832, "Here is the land of our progenitors, and here are their bones; they left them as a sacred deposit, and we have been compelled to venerate its trust; it is dear to us yet we cannot stay." To the detriment of our community, the forced removal of the majority of Choctaws from of our homeland to Indian Territory left countless ancestors in our homelands vulnerable to development, excavation, and disturbance. Our community has the responsibility to rectify this desecration.

With the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, Native American communities gained a measure of say over the treatment of ancestral burial sites on federal lands. The law also established a mechanism to help Native American, Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian communities have open dialogue with institutions throughout the country about the return of their ancestors, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's NAGPRA program has found success in a proactive, systematic approach to researching institutions' archaeological and ethnographic collections for NAGPRA eligibility. The journey brought many lessons, and more than twenty-five repatriations have been finalized, with more on the horizon, allowing for needed healing in our broader community.

In 1990, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Historic Preservation Department was merely a vision. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma gained Tribal Historic Preservation Office status through an agreement with the National Park Service in 2004, when the Tribe took over some of the duties of the Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office. Slowly, over the course of two decades, the department grew from a two-person team to thirty-one individuals supporting various programs. These programs include Section 106, Tribal Archaeology, Cultural GIS, Research and Community Outreach, NAGPRA, and Growing Hope, an heirloom-seed preservation and distribution program.

The Choctaw Nation's first repatriation and subsequent reburial ceremony occurred in 1999. In anticipation of future reburials, the Nation created a repatriation cemetery in consultation with elders near our Capitol Grounds in Tushkahomma, Oklahoma, in 2001. In the initial years of its existence, the Historic Preservation Department took a reactive approach to NAGPRA work, responding

to inadvertent discoveries alongside federal agencies when there was a nexus with the Section 106 program or when an institution sent a new inventory or summary to the office. Sadly, it was recognized early on that these notifications only marked the tip of the iceberg.

In 2009, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma established a committee of elders and spiritual leaders to address concerns for future NAGPRA work. Given that our people never planned to have to rebury our loved ones, we relied on its guidance to help establish spiritual protocols, procedures, and ceremonial considerations. Beginning in 2015, discussions with that committee encouraged taking a more proactive approach to NAGPRA work. Consequently, the Historic Preservation Department hired a full-time dedicated NAGPRA coordinator to design and implement a project to search collections across the United States, state by state, county by county, in all federally funded institutions, historical societies, museums, and universities. The idea was to leave no stone unturned.

Since 2016, through the No Stone Unturned initiative, the program is systematically contacting every repository in the United States that may fit NAGPRA's definition of a federal collection. The project takes a two-fold approach in its engagement with institutions. The department has compiled cultural knowledge into a research document that outlines the Choctaw Nation's nine-state area of historic interest, known collectors, pottery types, and archaeological phases associated with Choctaw ancestors, as well as previous historic names for Choctaw people. This document is sent to each of these institutions, along with a letter inquiring about potential NAGPRA collections as well as collections of Choctaw cultural objects not subject to NAGPRA. While priority is given to the location of our ancestors and their funerary objects identified as eligible for NAGPRA, we also begin conversations about an institution's non-NAGPRA ethnographic collections.

Many times, items from ethnographic collections are added with permission of use to the Chahta Imponna (Choctaw Maker) database to help interested Tribal members research and revitalize traditional arts. The Chahta Imponna database utilized an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant to purchase Proficio software to catalog relevant non-NAGPRA Choctaw cultural items found in collections for each record in the database. This allowed for the inclusion of detailed information about the maker, the date it was made, components, and high-resolution images. Fostering relationships between the Choctaw community and institutions through the Imponna database allows for reciprocity of knowledge. On the one hand, the Tribe has the ability to document additional Choctaw cultural objects, allowing contemporary artists to learn from their construction.

On the other hand, the institution obtains a richer level of knowledge about the Choctaw objects in its collection through interacting with the office and the community that created them. To see examples of some Choctaw artisan items from the search of collections, visit Hina Hanta—The Bright Path (hinahanta.choctawnation.com).

Returning to NAGPRA, through consultation with Tribes, an institution learns the specific preferences of each Tribal community engaged in the process. With that in mind, in addition to the research document and letter of inquiry, a document is also sent explaining the cultural protocols and preferences for the treatment of ancestors while in collections. For instance, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma views an individual's Human Remains, their funerary objects, and their soil matrix as sacred and gives instructions for their housing and preparation before repatriation. The preference is for ancestors to have as little disturbance as possible. This makes it essential to start consultation early to avoid having to make changes after their rehousing (e.g., transferring from plastic bags to unbleached muslin). Adhering to these preferences marks one of the ways of building, often resulting in long-lasting, meaningful relationships between the Choctaw Nation and the institutions that make NAGPRA repatriations to the Choctaw Nation or that curate non-NAGPRA Choctaw cultural items.

Each correspondence is recorded in the NAGPRA consultation database under an entry for that institution. For institutions that do have Choctaw NAGPRA collections, the database records the current stage of the NAGPRA process: inquiry, inventory, review, consultation, Notice of Inventory Completion (NIC), or repatriation-reburial. This database is continuously updated as new correspondence and consultation occurs. The aim is to help each institution move from one stage in the process to the next every four to six months. The NAGPRA program staff often work with institutions that apply for NAGPRA consultation and documentation grants by providing letters of support during their application process.

To date, phase 1 of No Stone Unturned has reached out to 2,100 institutions. Although we are still on phase 1 in some states, we have simultaneously begun phase 2, reaching back out to those institutions that did not respond to the first round of inquiries. Phase 3 will concentrate on data analysis to understand specifics about our experience with the NAGPRA process, including a story map of locations across the country where our ancestors were taken and housed in collections prior to repatriation. Eventually, our systematic search will cross the ocean to other countries. In fact, we have already contacted and begun conversations with institutions in France, Germany, England, Scotland, Sweden, and Finland.

Consultation often lets us realize that collections deemed non-NAGPRA by institution in fact include NAGPRA-eligible objects as well. In 2022, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma worked with the Gilcrease Museum to repatriate the LeFlore pipe, an item of cultural patrimony under NAGPRA. This pipe was used at the signing of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek on September 15, 1830, by Greenwood LeFlore, other Choctaw chiefs, and representatives of the United States government. Louise LeFlore, direct descendent of Chief Greenwood LeFlore, gave this “pipe of peace” to the Gilcrease Museum in 1958.

For the Choctaw Nation, the Removal process lasted more than seventy-five years, forming a significant part of our national experience. Signing the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek put in motion the Choctaw Removals to Indian Territory, or the Trail of Tears. The Trail of Tears ultimately led to a physical and governmental split in the Choctaw people, with some staying in the Choctaw homeland, and others emigrating to Indian Territory. Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Tribal members are all descended from Trail of Tears survivors. While each family’s experience during Removal was unique, this pipe was present at a pivotal moment in our shared history. Under the National NAGPRA definition, this pipe has an ongoing historical, traditional, and cultural importance to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma; it cannot be owned by one Tribal member alone. It is now prominently displayed in our Cultural Center in the Removal History exhibit.

To date, the No Stone Unturned project has allowed our NAGPRA program to consult and identify numerous collections of interest across the United States. Presently our NAGPRA program is working with more than eighty institutions, twenty-four of them in the final phase of the NAGPRA process. We look forward to reburying thousands of ancestors in the coming years. This project is a work of love and honors those who came before us. It is an act of healing for our community and lessens the burden on future generations. We recognize that repatriation itself cannot heal the collective trauma experienced by Choctaw people. However, with each reburial, the dark cloud of the past is slowly balanced by the joy and pride of ensuring our loved ones find the peace intended for them.

While our NAGPRA work will continue for generations, the progress thus far has proved noteworthy. It has provided us with incredible insights to share about NAGPRA work throughout the country, the strength afforded by united efforts, and the affirmation that dedicated individuals exist to help during the lengthy process. In 2020, while moving into our new Cultural Center, the NAGPRA coordinator received files from storage to sort through. These files were essentially a time capsule from 1995. Hundreds of institutions did reach out to our

Tribal community, sent inventories, and invited us to consultation while fulfilling their NAGPRA responsibility. Yet these invitations were received before the Choctaw Nation even had a Historic Preservation Department. This proved enlightening and, with all the discussion surrounding non-compliance, pleasing to learn. A Tribal representative carefully organized the letters by state, and we used these invitations to start conversations—many leading to repatriation, more than twenty-five years later.

We have also learned that strength lies in unity. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma came together with our Southeastern Tribal partners, each as sovereign nations, to form the Southeastern Tribal Alliance for Repatriation and Reburial (STARR). Together we advocate for one another as we progress through the NAGPRA progress. Alliance members support one another by sharing information about collections of interest, their experiences with institutions, and holding space for important conversations about claims and the best path forward with a particular agency. This unity has proved helpful for many practitioners. They meet with our alliance, make introductions, and get conversations started. Afterward, each Tribal Nation follows up with the institution individually to begin formal consultation. Visit starralliance.info to learn more about our mission and the Tribal Nations represented.

Finally, this project would not have succeeded without the guidance of Melanie O'Brien, the current manager for the national NAGPRA program, her dedicated staff, and countless individuals across the country with compassionate, open hearts who have contributed to the healing aspect of this work. Their willingness to go above and beyond has significantly impacted our level of success. Institutional professionals offered their time and skill sets to provide images, prepare and send inventories, field phone calls, consult with sovereign nations to understand their preferences, and respectfully work through the NAGPRA process. They take guidance from Tribes, collaborate with communities, and genuinely advocate for lasting change. Oftentimes, they have inherited a NAGPRA collection at their institution and are unsure how to proceed, but they find a way through the mess. While some of these professionals are employed, many work as volunteers. Some have little to no financial means or staff to assist them, yet they continue to make progress and pass on their wisdom to the growing group of practitioners across the country. This brings hope. In the first phase of our project, we contacted many institutions, never hearing back. Now, in our second phase, seven years later, we are happy to connect with some of these institutions again and learn that they

now have NAGPRA coordinators, that their administration has allocated funds, and that they are working diligently toward NAGPRA compliance.

The tides are changing and the long-standing, accepted racist ethos that surrounded past collection efforts is being unwoven, slowly, by the next generation. The Choctaw Nation NAGPRA program finds great honor in offering guidance and mentorship to future professionals through classroom presentations, assistance in graduate research projects, and conference appearances. We hope to encourage the paving of new paths through meaningful and respectful Tribal consultation.