

AABA Task Force for the Ethical Study of Human Remains

AABA Annual Meeting Listening Session

21 April 2023 – 12:15-2:15 P.M.

The AABA Task Force invites all members to participate in this listening session at the Annual Meeting in Reno. The session will also be livestreamed for those who cannot attend in person.

The listening session will consist of two parts:

12:15-1:15 P.M.: Break-out group and full group discussion using scenarios provided by members of the Task Force (see below)

~1:15-2:15 P.M.: Open discussion and Q&A with members of the Task Force

To help participants in the listening session prepare, we are providing here the scenarios that we will discuss over the first hour. These scenarios are meant to encourage open discussion about ethics, community engagement, and models for community partnership, as well as the challenges all parties face in the pursuit of community-focused approaches to research.

SCENARIOS

#1: *Ethical approaches to working with recently discovered African American human remains*

Context: In the course of building a high-rise in an urban area, an unexpected set of burials are encountered. After a routine survey of the site, it is discovered the unmarked and untended burials of 10,000 individuals from the 18th and 19th centuries are broadly dispersed in the area now designated for construction. The burials appear to be of African-descent, and some may have been enslaved at the time of burial.

Problem: Archaeologists have brought you in to oversee research on the individuals interred at the site. Through public outreach and communication by the archeologists who surveyed the site, members of the local African American community have come forward and self-identified as members of the descendant community. Before you begin any study on individuals at the site, you contact the descendant community and arrange a series of meetings with them to talk about the site and their concerns.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) How does this case reflect ethical accountability to the public, especially communities of origin or descendant communities?
- 2) How do you ensure that community participation occurs in the context of this site, especially under the pressure of developers?
- 3) Half of the descendant community supports exhumation of the skeletal remains and the construction of the high-rise, while another part of the descendant community is adamantly against any exhumation of the deceased.
 - a. Who do you listen to as the researcher? Should one set of descendants be given prominence?
 - b. How do we resolve this conflict among communities? (Should *you* be the party that works to resolve their disagreement?)

#2: Working with legacy collections of African American human remains

Context: Multiple collections of documented human remains are held in museums and institutions of higher education worldwide. These include collections in Japan, South Africa, Uganda, Italy, the United Kingdom, Mexico, and elsewhere. In the United States, two collections that were assembled during the last decade of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century are especially prominent in research among biological anthropologists: the Hamann-Todd Collection (housed at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History) and the Terry Collection (housed at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History). These two collections represent the human remains of individuals who mostly were acquired through medical school anatomical dissection programs in Cleveland and Saint Louis, respectively. Anthropologists have used measurements and other data from these collections in research for over a century, though in no cases was consent from anatomical donors or their families obtained in their inclusion in the assembly of these two collections.

Problem: Carlos is a second-year graduate student in a Biological Anthropology doctorate program and is interested in pursuing his doctoral research in forensic anthropology. During his recent graduate coursework, he learned about an estimation method that was created using documented skeletal collections comprising mostly older White individuals. Carlos is interested in testing how accurate the method works in a population of African Americans, using documented skeletal collections like the Hamann-Todd and Terry Collections. As Carlos develops his dissertation proposal, his advisor has suggested he get in touch with the institutions that house these collections to get information about how to obtain researcher access. When he asks his advisor about whether he should reach out to descendent communities as well, his advisor tells him there is no legal reason to contact anyone other than the museum curators, and that even if Carlos wanted to there is no community to consult given the age and nature of documentation for the collections.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) What do you think about the response of Carlos' advisor? What should Carlos do in this situation?
- 2) How might Carlos be able to involve contemporary African American communities in his research? *Should* Carlos do this? What are some of the potential issues he should consider with respect to identifying communities to contact?
- 3) What values should be considered with respect to bringing research questions to a community instead of asking the community for their input before any research is considered?
- 4) What models might we as biological anthropologists consider to help junior researchers like Carlos 1) be able to complete his doctoral studies and 2) be able to engage in the community partnered approaches that he expresses eagerness to pursue?