

Human remains within an Apache knowledge ecology: an interview with Vernelda Grant

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Abstract

This edited transcript of conversations between an Apache cultural heritage professional, Vernelda Grant, and researcher Bridget Conley explores the knowledge that should guide the repatriation of human remains in the colonial context of repatriating Apache sacred, cultural and patrimonial items – including human remains – from museum collections in the United States. Grant provides a historical overview of the how Apache elders first grappled with this problem, following the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) in the US Congress. She explains how and why community leaders made decisions about what items they would prioritise for repatriation. Central to her discussion is an Apache knowledge ecology grounded in recognition that the meaning of discrete items cannot be divorced from the larger religious and cultural context from which they come.

Key words: repatriation, Apache, human remains, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990), cultural patrimony

Introduction: decolonising collections means more than repatriation

The diversity of Indigenous cultures in the Americas is immense; the degree of colonial impact on these cultures and peoples is equally overwhelming.¹ Over the course of centuries of widespread violence and displacement, colonising people attempted to transform the vibrancy of Indigenous cultures to the status of museum curiosities. In the process, thousands upon thousands of elements from living cultures, dynamic theologies and entire cosmologies were transformed into itemisable ‘objects’.² As if performing a dark magic act, colonising actors and forces grabbed hold of land, cultural and sacred items, as well as human remains, extracted them from their context and treated them as privately owned parcels or neatly itemised museum ‘artefacts’. That this effort succeeded in many ways was due to a profound power imbalance. The ways in which it failed were largely due



to the refusals put forward by Indigenous people. They resisted and found ways to protect their living heritage.

In 1990, the United States government passed a law that endeavoured to address one aspect of the colonial project: the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). NAGPRA required that museums and federal agencies inventory collections related to Native American peoples, provide the inventories to Indigenous communities and consult with them regarding cultural affiliation and repatriation. While the law stands alone – ‘no other country has (yet) created a similar law’³ – it is imperfect. NAGPRA is both a valuable step forward and a flawed approach. Between 1990 and 2020 (the most recent year for which a report has been published), the US National Park Service estimates that as a result of the legislation, for example, ‘91.51% of culturally affiliated human remains have completed the NAGPRA process’, and that it has facilitated the return of approximately 1.78 million funerary objects and approximately 21,000 other cultural items.⁴ Nonetheless, NAGPRA rests upon many power imbalances in terms of which tribes are recognised, defining what counts as ‘culturally affiliated’ and the degree of ‘consultation’ undertaken.⁵ An attempt to marry property law and civil rights, NAGPRA nonetheless functions within colonial logic; it requires that ‘objects’ be located within a juridical taxonomy, verified, evaluated and separately addressed. ‘Objects’ are classified as either NAGPRA or not NAGPRA,⁶ creating legal and rhetorically clear categories that historical and cultural guidance would suggest are untenable. In 2020, the human remains of 116,857 Native Americans and 777,982 funerary ‘objects’ remain in NAGPRA-governed collections and ‘are pending consultation and/or notice’.⁷

Beyond the formalities of ‘repatriation’, the work of decolonising museum collections requires listening to and endeavouring to understand not only claims put forward in legal and administrative discourses but also those that are articulated from within a different cosmology. This is the key lesson that Vernelda Grant, an Apache cultural heritage professional, provides throughout her work and in the below interview.

The people known today as Apache lived in the present-day states of Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, as well as northern parts of Mexico. Their homelands were targeted for settlement following the Mexican–American War (1846–48). A series of wars between American government-aligned forces and Apache tribes followed for another forty years. US governmental forces and armed settler groups regularly targeted Apache civilians with killings and massacres as part of a plan to displace and concentrate the Apache into reservations.⁸ Although skirmishes continued through the early 1920s, the wars ended in 1886, a date marked by the defeat of a legendary Chiricahua Apache leader, Geronimo. Geronimo and many Apache soldiers were captured and spent decades in prisons. Apache children were taken from their families and sent to a boarding school, which aimed to alienate them from their community, culture and language. Throughout the period of white settler-colonial expansion, and with more intensity in the twentieth century, collectors sought Apache everyday objects, cultural patrimony, ritual and sacred objects and human remains.⁹ Human remains were

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taken as part of archaeological excavations,¹⁰ ending up in both private and museum collections.

Grant's work as the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer of the San Carlos Apache Tribe in Arizona primarily focuses on the protection and preservation of cultural resources in the Apache reservations by building coalitions between tribal communities and neighbouring communities outside of the reservations. Her main focus has been grassroots organising and mobilising individuals in her community who are passionate about preserving holy grounds and sites that are important not just to the Apache people but also to the history of the United States. In 2004, she was appointed to the Native American Advisory Group for the Advisory Council of Historic Preservation in Washington, DC.

In 2006, Grant led a delegation from the White House-appointed Office of Intergovernmental Affairs Office to Mount Graham, a site in southeastern Arizona. The mountain is sacred to Apache people, forms a unique ecosystem and is home to an array of protected species. In the 1980s, the University of Arizona sought rights to build an observatory on top of the mountain. The ensuing controversy pitted the University and its partners (including the Vatican, Max Planck Institute and other American universities) against Indigenous advocates and environmentalists, who filed dozens of lawsuits in an attempt to halt the project.¹¹ Grant's work on this issue included a meeting that sparked the beginning of partnerships between government leaders and tribal communities, successfully giving the Apache people a greater voice when further development and conservation plans are being discussed. Grant was a member of the 2009 Arizona Progressive Leaders Fellowship.

The following is a transcript of a series of oral conversations and written exchanges conducted between January and April 2022 between Bridget Conley and Vernelda Grant. They edited the transcript in collaboration.

Interview with Vernelda Grant

BC: Vernelda, it is an honour to speak with you about your work as a cultural anthropologist and community leader. Thank you for joining me to discuss how we conceive of a just response to human and other cultural 'objects' – and I intentionally want to question that term – that have been disrupted and displaced due to a history of political violence. What is especially compelling about your perspective is that you bring to these questions a mix of inherited and cultural knowledge alongside your formal education.

VG: I appreciate you saying that. In the age of science that we live in, the emotions and spiritual matters seem to be excluded because they are not measured and seen with the naked eye. I have formal training in anthropology, and that mixes with my sense of self as a traditional person, an Apache woman who comes from a family that has gifts of healing that are gifted from, in our beliefs, Creator and God.

I was brought up in a very strict, traditional Apache household. I was the middle child and the only girl in the family. Coming from a matrilineal society, that already put me in a category where we are valued. When a female is born, there is a sigh of

relief, but also there's a certain burden, because of all the things entailed in having a female in your household.

I received my bachelor's degree in Cultural Anthropology, with a minor in English. In my formal studies, I encountered things that really made me hate the field that I'm in and dislike the mindset of the people in my field. I didn't like the literature that I read in university and was made as a student to believe in, absorb and to reference as a true source. Among the information I found objectionable was that telling me that I come from a dead culture – that my lifeways are dead. This false narrative is possible because there are not enough publications and evidence of how we, the Apache, live. Apache are a nomadic society and people. We make it a practice to not leave things behind like pottery and personal belongings – this lack of 'evidence' makes people doubt that we have been here for thousands of years.

In anthropology and the study of linguistics, it is claimed that we came through the Bering Strait, then down into the Southwest. This perspective is drawn from our language, which has relatives all along that pathway. Anthropological theory states that we arrived in what is now the state of Arizona back in the 1400s. This theory clashes with my whole belief system and our Apache creation story. Our creation story mentions that Creator placed us within a range of mountains that form a border which delineates our territory, our homeland where we live and thrive. Some of the mountain ranges include Mount Graham, Pinal Mountain, the Superstition Mountain, San Francisco Peaks, Mount Taylor (in New Mexico), among many others in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and down into Mexico. These places are holy and alive and are like the Vatican to us. We don't have just one place or an enclosed building with four walls, we have whole mountain landscapes that are essential to our well-being. I grew up learning about and going to these places, offering prayers, singing songs and [participating in] ceremonies. The theories taught in my university education went against what I grew up with and what, first and foremost, made me a beautiful, strong person. What made me love my culture was non-existent.

Nonetheless, I stayed at university and earned my master's degree in archaeology, focusing on the southwest, learning GIS and database management. I primarily worked for and with the tribes and made sure that my degrees were practical for Indigenous populations. I was offered many jobs with state and federal agencies, but I didn't accept any of them as I thought my experience can be put to use to benefit Indigenous populations. I thought I could be a voice in an arena that did not have, at the time, many Indigenous and formally trained archaeologists in my area.

BC: Currently, you are the Director, the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer and NAGPRA representative of the San Carlos Apache Tribe in Arizona.

VG: Yes, I created this position for myself. At the time (2000), there wasn't a position like this at all. So, I created the department and became the director. I used the practical guide I completed from my graduate school internship to create the Historic Preservation and Archaeology Department, which initially wasn't properly funded – it's still not properly funded – but I did manage to acquire

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enough money to hire an archaeology aid, interns and seasonal employees. During that time, it was almost non-existent for a young female to undertake such a task, but through perseverance and support from fellow female programme managers I had a humble but positive start.

BC: Over the centuries of white settler colonialism in the United States, many Apache sacred sites have been displaced, looted and overrun. One result of this history is that many Apache cultural heritage and human remains ended up in federal museums and collections. The history of how this came to happen and the violence it entailed requires a separate discussion. For this discussion, we are focusing on the process that governed the repatriation of these materials. I wanted to start by asking you that we speak about these materials – the language we use. Why is it not accurate to speak of sacred items and human remains as ‘objects’?

VG: Using these descriptors, they do not mention the life, the breath, the ‘living’ being that the items possess that we, as Apaches, see them as having. The items represent some part of a life source in our world. These descriptors make the items seem that they didn’t serve a purpose.

I have two examples. In 1996, I interned at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC. As part of giving thanks for Creator’s blessings, we begin and end things in prayer. I had to go to the bathroom to pray in the morning and to the bathroom to pray when I left the building, because at the time there was no such thing as having a separate room to pray in. There were 18,500 ‘objects’ in little green boxes along the staircases and the hallways, and like a little lab rat, I went from the first floor at the back of the Natural History Museum all the way to the fourth floor facing the National Capitol, avoiding these little green boxes filled with human remains that were unidentified. In our thinking, there is no such thing as ‘unidentified or unknown’ when human remains are discussed. This is what happens when you treat the human remains of ancestors as ‘objects’. You might find 18,500 little green boxes with human remains with nowhere to go but to be stored in this imbalanced, disrespectful manner.

This disrespect also impacts on sacred items. I think of a young Apache girl at her Coming-of-Age ceremony. She is given a cane that is made for her, so she can grow old. That cane, she can use as an elder, so she can walk around. The feathers on her cane, a horse hoof on the front, bells: all of this has meaning and represents part of her life. Her buckskin outfit, her beaded necklace, the paint on her face, the abalone shell on her forehead: these ‘objects’ represent life, the girl’s life, her people’s life, her being a leader to her people, her being a mother to our people. Making sure that she lives a good long life, humble, and walks a straight path, is a good person with strong faith and is not lazy. In this modern world, we pray that she gets an education, finds a job and is a role model for her community. All those things are prayed for. Her health, from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet underneath her moccasins. All these things that are so beautiful. The dancers at her Coming-of-Age ceremony, that represent our deities, also wear sacred materials. We pray for the eagle feathers, the crown, the sticks and the headdress of the

Mountain Spirit or crown dancer. All these elements are used in prayer for her, and she prays for herself and our people.

It is very difficult to set these things in museums, classified into boxes, labelled and put in a cabinet with door closed, left to sit there for years. These items were stolen or unfairly acquired years ago and made to look like they were legally and beneficially obtained by experts, tagged as property and transformed into collectors' items. These items serve a purpose in our culture and our origin story. In this ceremony, the young girl prays for healing, for protection – we believe that her prayers can help or heal problems our community has with health, such as diabetes, heart disease. These objects, these materials, have so much meaning. The meaning is misunderstood when you don't see where they came from.

BC: What determines if something is 'alive' in Apache culture?

VG: There are Apache cultural determinations that we follow that I'm not sure if I can share openly to mark the objects that are alive.

BC: In 1990, the US government passed a law, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act – or NAGPRA – that provides for the repatriation and disposition of certain Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. The law recognised that human remains and other cultural items removed from federal or tribal lands belong, in the first instance, to lineal descendants, Indian Tribes and Native Hawaiian organisations. But the law, while significant, was just a starting point. Decades of negotiations, discussions and engagement followed thereafter, many of them extremely painful and difficult for Native people, whose living culture clashed with the ways of thinking and practices of museum culture.

Federal museums were deeply impacted upon by this law, including ones that make up the Smithsonian Museums in Washington, DC. After finishing your bachelor's degree in Anthropology, you interned at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) Repatriation Office, a position where you were tasked with helping the Apache tribes to review 1,500 cultural items in their enormous collection of Native American artefacts.

Can you talk about how these materials ended up in the Museum in Washington, DC?

VG: The 1,500 items marked Apache, in general, were collected from various places in the southwest and western United States. The main source of the collection stemmed from the time the Apaches were imprisoned at Old San Carlos, on what is now the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation, San Carlos, Arizona.

BC: What kinds of 'objects' did you find in the warehouse full of drawers of cultural heritage?

VG: The objects included items from our ceremonies for healing and protection, for Coming-of-Age ceremonies for the Apache girls and for personal use for prayer.

BC: Can you describe your experience of encountering them in an archive?

VG: When I first viewed the items in the facility where they were stored, I was calm and did my best to be strong, as I had a job to do for the people, and for the items themselves. I had an opposing task to complete, and by that, I mean that

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I had to fulfil the requirements for completing my internship duties. That meant that I had to collect information for the Smithsonian Institution and, depending upon what is collected and reviewed by the Apache tribes, and according to the NAGPRA law, not all these holy, important cultural items that we hold dear in our hearts and in our ceremonies will be returned 'home'. As with all work in this arena, I began and ended my day in prayer. Asking for guidance to do what is best, to be respectful and to make responsible decisions in gathering all the details from each item and where/how they were stored. Some days were heavy, due to the sensitivity of the item, and other days I was happy to see familiar items that we still make and use presently. I was happy that my people persevered and that my culture and my language are alive and not dead.

BC: How did this experience of working in a museum influence your approach to protecting cultural heritage, which has become your profession – and, as you've noted, is also a way of living?

VG: When I interned at the Smithsonian's NMNH Repatriation Office, it was the first time I travelled to Washington, DC. This was the first introduction to what I thought was another universe, one that represented how we, our lifeways, were controlled, as it was a place that created laws and regulations, not just for my people, but for the whole country.

BC: How did NAGPRA impact on your community?

VG: NAGPRA was passed in 1990 at the end of November, and by the summer and spring of the next year we started receiving all kinds of things: photos and boxes of reports. All the tribes started getting these five-inch and three-inch binders – reports and photos of all the inventories that are Apache – from the museum archives. They started getting bombarded with boxes and boxes – floor-to-ceiling piles of file boxes arriving from all these museums in the United States. And the tribal leaders and/or elders are supposed to decide what is most important.

Can you imagine? Imagine receiving everything from a museum archive, marked as Apache, being shipped to your office? It was a little insane to see these boxes. At the time, my tribal leaders had only our culture centre next to the highway, which sold authentic arts and crafts made by local artisans. It was not set up to handle these inventories and legal documents.

Eventually, these boxes were routed to the Tribe's Planning Department. The secretary started receiving all these materials and didn't know what to do with them. One day, the secretary opened a box on her desk and there was a human skull in there. She shrieked, went across the street to our Tribal Administration building, and said, 'I'm not doing this anymore.' That is what made the tribal council and the chairman at that time decide that something needed to be done. At this time, there was an informal elders' group working on botany projects with the Tribal Botanist, and the tribe decided to give them all of the NAGPRA materials. That is how our Elders Cultural Advisory Council (ECAC) was given formal responsibility for NAGPRA for our Tribe. I was a co-op student under the Forestry Program at that time, which is how I got assigned to work with the ECAC in December of 1993.

This story is strictly our own Tribe's story. Other tribes in the country have their stories related to early NAGPRA years. I know that the Navajo Nation had a department that existed since the 1980s that worked on historic preservation and archaeology projects. I'm sure they knew what to do with their inventory reports. Whereas, we were like, 'What in the world?'

BC: Can you say more about the role of elders in deciding how to engage with NAGPRA?

VG: Our Elders' Council members represented the four local community districts from our reservation. We had elders who were in their eighties, nineties and hundred-year-old elders – more than twenty of them. We don't have all of them anymore; the last of the older ones passed a couple years back. But at that time, you entered the room and there was just pure wisdom. It was overwhelming. Some of them were my grandmas and grandpas from bloodline, but there were others as well, I called them all my grandmas and grandpas, and they referred to each other as 'brothers' and 'sisters'.

The early years of repatriation began with this set of overwhelmingly awesome people who were so full of wisdom that you want to be around them because they're so humble, and they love you to death. What was best was always trying to figure things out together. Many of their messages were strict, but were said so kindly and in a way that was educational.

These elders went through a time period when their parents were getting killed, murdered, and they were being rounded up and taken to prison camps or boarding schools. They were born into that. And they've come through all kinds of sickness and diseases – even smallpox. And they were here guiding us. That is the type of elders that we were working with. They really set the foundation for not just our group and its work on repatriation, but other tribes who came in and said, 'How did you guys form your coalition? What do you guys do? How did you deal with your local tribal politics? How did you manage that, because we're not moving forward?' It all goes back to the respect and responsibility in our elders, and the seriousness of the subject matter that we were talking about: repatriation.

I could say that I was lucky to be a young person who was around, getting them tea and coffee and making them comfortable, and most importantly, praying with them. I think if they were around today, they would have made such a difference for our children and the young adults that are around now, too.

We formed a coalition with the other Western Apache tribes from the state of Arizona (White Mountain, Camp Verde Yavapai-Apache, Payson Tonto Apache and Fort McDowell Yavapai-Apache Nation). And again, we formed the All Apache NAGPRA Working Group, a bigger working group with the other federally recognised Apache tribes in New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas (Mescalero Apache Tribe, Jicarilla Apache Tribe, Fort Sill Apache Tribe). Our elders set the whole mood and tone of our meetings in person. They set the principles and guidelines when they gathered in Tucson for the first time in the mid-1990s and worked out how to engage with NAGPRA. I was really lucky to be a part of it because I was still in school, going back and forth during my spring semester at university. While meeting on the NAGPRA guidelines, the working group pretty much followed

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what the law said: you have to separate human remains from what is considered a sacred object, versus an object of cultural patrimony, because there's different forms of cultural patrimony. We were given definitions, and then tried to figure out what fell under which category. That was the basic start. After several years, we began to notice that museums interpreted these definitions in their own way, and sometimes that led to prolonged claims and legal actions.

Together, the Western Apache and All Apache NAGPRA Working Group worked as a coalition to manage repatriation issues. We found out that working as a group strengthened our claims. We're always set up to fight one another – and Apaches are good at fighting one another. But this issue made us come together, because of the intensity of what we were dealing with. It made us aware that there are greater things beyond us that we are dealing with. So, in this area, the politics did not matter and when our Coalition came together, we did the most responsible and respectful thing that we could possibly do. If we didn't work in this manner, we knew that we could get hurt, or that we can hurt one another, or people that are close to us can be hurt – ultimately, our family, our children and our community can be hurt. These elders gave us the voice and the strength we needed because they thought and worked from their hearts, not always with their mind. So that is how our working group began and it is still how we work today.

BC: What were some of the challenges of repatriation?

VG: The first challenge was back during the time when our elders had to be informed of what repatriation is and how it will make them/us talk about highly sensitive and spiritual objects and human remains. And to be put in a position to determine what object and/or set of human remains is more important or more holy than the other. This was a thought process that we were not ready for, to prioritise objects and the return of our ancestors.

BC: One of the things that I hadn't understood, except through talking with you, was the need to think an entire cosmology, rather than pulling out one little piece, to address an ethical approach to human remains. There have been debates among experts and communities impacted upon by mass violence who are seeking to identify the remains of their loved ones, about how to treat an incomplete skeleton or even a fragment of a skeleton. But what you have been saying is that for you and for Apache, that there is a prior question that needs to be addressed when grappling with repatriating sacred and cultural objects and human remains. The prior question is to consider the relationship of the part to the whole. This requires addressing the interactions of human lives, 'objects' (sorry for that wrong word again) and the universe in which those lives and objects find meaning. In short, you cannot pull these threads apart.

VG: You are correct. This information, although I believe it is easy to comprehend, in the timeframe that we exist, in the Age of Science – everything is measured, land or property is measured, and evidence needs to be gathered to legitimise or prove things. If a miracle occurred today, right at this time, then for one to believe that it actually occurred they had to have seen it with their own eyes (possibly feel it at the same time too). The material elements and human life are inseparable. In our world, everything is related to one another.

What I learned from the elders in how I was brought up at home and from the Elders' Council and working with them on NAGPRA, is that our traditional Apache life is rooted in a deep and personal understanding of the natural world and the forces that govern it. I want to share the Elders' resource policy statement to give an idea of our thought processes when we do our work.

Central to traditional ecological knowledge is a meaningful level of understanding of each particular element of the natural world and its power, how to access this power and how to ensure access to this power by maintaining healthy and active relationships with each of these elements. This large body of scientific knowledge has been held, until very recent times, as common knowledge by the Apache communities as a whole. Apaches have long understood how to survive and thrive with few material resources, and how to utilise ceremonial systems and song cycles to access the power of specific elements of the natural world for healing, protection and sustenance.

Traditional Apache life is centred on understanding and respecting natural ecosystems, and living in a manner that does not significantly alter these ecosystems. Traditional Apaches stand as an example of a society that has consciously sought to live in absolute harmony with the natural world.

Attaining this harmony took not only a great understanding of the natural world, but the discipline to make often harsh decisions in order to ensure living within strict traditional rules that governed almost all aspects of life.

Personal behaviour is traditionally governed by one's impact on, and relationship with, the natural world. Traditionally, one must always be conscious of the surrounding world, and of how one can minimise one's impact upon it, in order to avoid suffering the consequences of a broken relationship. For example, disrespecting mountain lions can result in a broken relationship with the Enilnan Dighin, which can make one physically or emotionally sick or unprotected from viruses, infections and food-related illnesses, as well as a loss of hunting success. Restoring these broken relationships, maintaining good relationships and ensuring good relationships in the future are the reason for traditional healing, ceremonies and general behaviour.

Based on their work in ethnobotany and NAGPRA, the Elders' Council came up with the Elders' Council's Traditional Apache Resource Policy Statements, with the first being, 'Respect all aspects of the natural world'; second, 'All activities must ensure the long-term health of the natural world, especially respecting the prime importance of water'; third, 'we all belong to the earth'; and fourth, 'economic activities must be broad-based and varied' (May 2006).¹²

BC: How did your elders grapple with the challenge of deciding what elements to repatriate first?

VG: After prayers were completed. There were a lot of questions. How do we prioritise? Do we bring back the remains of our children first, or our elders, or our medicine people, or do we just prioritise human remains, period? And then the discussions led to, what about objects with eagle feathers on it? Or what about objects that used to have eagle feathers? These items were not just pottery, not just a basket, not just a medicine bag: because what was that medicine bag used for?

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What is painted on it? What type of beads were used, what style of beadwork does it have?

What we decided was that we will bring back items like the medicine bundles that deal with the ceremonies. And at the end, because of the whole sensitivity of it, and the sacredness of the remains, the elders decided to bring back ancestral remains after the initial work of bringing back the items that were still considered to be alive. Our coalition worked to bring back the Mountain Spirit/Crown dancers' headdresses, medicine bundles and the items with the feathers. Items used in our ceremonies were prioritised. The elders decided that we would leave human remains to the end.

BC: Was the decision based on preparing for the human remains?

VG: A lot of it has to do with taboo, because death is such a taboo in our culture. Bringing back human remains had to be considered at the end. For us, everyone matters. In our discussion on the return of human remains, the information on paper was easier to handle, but when the time came to be around, and for some, to handle – that task was overwhelming. It was very sad, you just wanted to cry when the elders shared what they were thinking. They were serious, they were looking at their papers and thinking. I never saw them that way before. We are at the point in our work that we are reviewing the disposition of human remains and considering the time for their return. We have a whole new generation of elders that may approach this subject matter slightly differently than the elders that began this journey when the NAGPRA law was first passed. This is part of the next phase in our journey.

BC: In your experience, what factors determine a 'right way' – or at least, a better way – to develop practices that govern treatment of human remains of people who died (or were killed) in ways that make traditional funerary practices difficult, if not impossible?

VG: That we have to first and foremost pray about the best guidance we can get to make the best decision, so no one will get hurt or suffer the consequences of not following our cultural ways of taking care of our ancestors and these holy, highly sensitive objects. We should approach everything we do in the most respectful, responsible and transparent way. We believe that if we do this, some form of balance, closure and healing occurs.

The 'right way' seems to not exist because there are different circumstances involved to determine what is best to do; this is dependent upon each unique situation.

BC: You have been telling us to ask foundational questions – not just who decides how to treat human remains, but even more fundamentally, who decides what's alive? To me, all the questions are caught up in power imbalances in the wake of large-scale violence and what to do with what 'remains' shifted at that moment. You draw our attention to the question of who decides on the matters of life and death itself. Are there issues that have changed over time in your work on repatriation? What are the most important cultural heritage projects that you are working on now, are there any analytical, legal and policy approaches in cultural heritage and a history of violence that is overlooked or misunderstood?

VG: An easy answer to this is the continued genocide of the people, the Apache, the Indigenous people, peoples of the world – as Apaches, we live in a dominant worldview that is not originally ours, as Creator (God) made for us to live in. These approaches come from a thought process that is foreign, from language that is not in the form of our own, with our own cognitive understanding. We are supposed to know how to solve problems using approaches that are foreign in thought from an Apache way of solving things; these processes are written in a manner that follows a foreign structure of laws that we originally know nothing about as Apaches. Our way of life had its own successful Apache approach, its own political structure where actions that affected our lifeways and existence were taken seriously, as it had a direct effect on our life, our health, our mind, body and spiritual well-being. The way of life we have today follows a foreign concept of a way of life that we don't excel in and we take a longer period of time to absorb, communicate and to be successful. The measures of success, in this world, are different from the measure of success in life as an Apache.

We have to continue to live our Apache way of life to the best of our ability. To ensure that we continue to teach our approach to how to live a good life, being responsible, to love and care and be in balance; understanding what our purpose is here in our life at this time. And to always be thankful for the life we have and the blessings that are around us everywhere we go. That we shouldn't lose our ties to who we are, as Apaches and as a citizen of the world. I remember that we use to pray for our fellow Apache people, then through the decades, we prayed for Indigenous peoples and their existence and lifeways. Now, with the state of the world that we live in, we pray for all races, religions and cultures. We have nowhere else to go to live but on Mother Earth and we must do what we can to keep balance in all areas of our life. If we don't do this, then we are lost, we do not identify as Apache or Indigenous, and the state of our world and the rest of humanity will continue to not be in balance and may one day destroy itself or in some way not exist in a healthy way.

I'm working on how we can continue to exist in this changing world, when politics, money and power seem to be the primary focus for those who already have so much of it. Being an Indigenous, Apache woman and by trade, an archaeologist. I feel that I am doing and will continue to do what my grandmother, my mom and aunties told me to do. That is, go and learn the dominant way of life, come back home and be a weapon for the people. With prayer all around me and with Creator's guidance, I will do my best to continue advocating and being a voice for my people.

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Notes

- 1 Settler-colonial populations in the Americas deployed a startling array of strategies and tactics against Indigenous communities. The violence of this history is too rarely studied. Some important contributions include: W. Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1997); B. Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2016); and A. Woolford and J. Bevenuto (eds), *Canada and Colonial Genocide* (London, Routledge, 2018).
- 2 As illustration of why word choice is so important in this context: in 2013, Apache leaders, including Vernelda Grant, refused an offer from the American Museum of Natural History to return '77 objects from its collection, including headwear, feathers, bows and arrows, medicine rings and satchels containing crystals and charms'. The Apache leaders' refusal was provoked by the Museum's language describing the items as 'cultural items', rather than 'sacred' objects and 'items of cultural patrimony'. See T. Mashberg, 'Where Words Mean as Much as Objects', *New York Times*, 19 August 2013. The article includes a photograph of three people, described as 'Apache officials'; only a man in the centre, Vincent Randall, is named. Nonetheless, Vernelda Grant is clearly recognisable.
- 3 S. Nash and C. Colwell, 'NAGPRA at 30: The Effects of Repatriation', *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*, 49 (2020), 225–39, at 226, doi: 10.1146/annurev-anthro-010220-075435.
- 4 National Park Service, 'Fiscal Year 2020 Report: National NAGPRA Program', US Department of the Interior (2020), p. 4, <https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/DownloadFile/659340> (accessed 30 August 2022).
- 5 S. Nash, 'How Museums Can Do More than Just Repatriate Objects', *Sapiens*, 13 May 2021, www.sapiens.org/column/curiosities/propatriation-nagpra/ (accessed 16 April 2022).
- 6 R. Wheeler, J. Aresenault and M. Taylor, 'Beyond NAGPRA/Not NAGPRA', *Collections*, 18:1 (2022), 8–17, doi: 10.1177/15501906211072916.
- 7 National Park Service, 'Fiscal Year 2020 Report', p. 5.
- 8 J. R. Welch, 'Earth, Wind, and Fire: Pinal Apaches, Miners, and Genocide in Central Arizona, 1859–1874', *SAGE Open*, October (2017), 1–19, at 8–14, doi: 10.1177/2158244017747016.
- 9 J. R. Welch and T.J. Ferguson, 'Putting *Patria* Back into Repatriation: Cultural Assessment of White Mountain Apache Tribal Lands', *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 7:2 (2007), 171–98, 172–3, doi: 10.1177/1469605307077477.
- 10 Welch and Ferguson, 'Putting *Patria* Back into Repatriation', 193–5.
- 11 J. T. Helfrich, 'Cultural Survival in Action: Ola Cassadore Davis and the Struggle for *Dził Nchaa Si'an* (Mount Graham)', *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, 1:2 (2014), 151–75, doi: 10.25071/1913-9632.35829; J. R. Welch, R. Riley and

- M. V. Nixon, 'Discretionary Desecration: Dził Nchaa Si An (Mount Graham) and Federal Agency Decisions Affecting American Indian Sacred Sites', *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 33:4 (2009), 29–68, doi: 10.17953/aicr.33.4.2866316711817855.
- 12 The full text of the Apache 'Four Traditional Guiding Principles' used to manage land can be found in the Apache Tribes' Preliminary Disclosure Statement in a legal case they brought, along with Concerned Citizens and Retired Miners Coalition *et al v.* State of Arizona, Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (Arizona Office of Administrative Hearings, docket: 17-001-WQAB) 4 December 2017, www.azoah.com/portal.html (accessed 13 September 2022).