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Book Review: Transforming the Dead

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sessed Indigenous host populations worldwide in Chapter 8. He summarizes the purpose of the book succinctly:

By revealing the “negatives” of history, to borrow from photography’s double entendre, Brown and Kanouse illuminate a potential path to the future. This pathway is not prescriptive. Rather it uses photography to illuminate the dark recesses of colonial settlement and indigenous dispossession in a way that challenges the unfettered continuation of settler colonialism. [p. 239]

Miner incorporates the four cardinal directions, so important in Native American cosmology and symbolism, into the headings of his chapter subsections, which define settler colonialism and its consequences, compares the Sauk and Meskwaki historical experiences with those of other Native Americans, analyzes the potential of art, and political-artistic works such as Re-Collecting Black Hawk, as a means of deconstructing our colonialist past, and calls for the disavowal of settler colonialism and “settler privilege,” the idea that land and resources are there for the taking by colonial people. In a final subsection, Miner promotes the idea that a collaborative shift in thinking is needed to bring about a truly postcolonial future.

In the final chapter, Arizona State University history professor Waziyatawin, a Wahpetunwan Dakota, discusses the U.S.-Dakota war of 1862 in the context of settler colonialism and efforts by the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) to develop a commemorative program during the sesquicentennial anniversary of the closure of that conflict. An attempt to present the conflict in balanced terms in an MHS exhibition fell short of the mark in Waziyatawin’s estimation, who argues that the MHS ignored recent Dakota and Indigenous scholarship on the subject, demonstrating that the MHS is “still committed to maintaining the colonial status quo.” She also recognizes that, as a result of the decades of colonial occupation of the Dakota homeland and the imposition of settler institutions, Dakota people today are also not united in their ideas about understanding, interpreting and commemorating the conflict, just as their ancestor were 150 years earlier. To Waziyatawin, the future for the Dakota relies on a unified spirit of resistance in the struggle to maintain their land and way of life.

Re-Collecting Black Hawk is an artistic work, yet much more than a coffee table book for casual readers. The book would serve well as a college text for students of Native American and Euro-American relations. Indeed, that may have been an underlying purpose of the book. Regardless, Re-Collecting Black Hawk is a work that anyone interested in Native American history and politics should read.


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Norman O’Brown, the twentieth-century social philosopher, stated in his book Love’s Body, that “the human body is not a thing or substance, given, but a continuous creation” (1966:155). Clearly embracing this conviction, Hargrave, Schermer, Hedman, and Lillie have crafted a volume, Transforming the Dead: Culturally Modified Bone in the Prehistoric Midwest, that provides readers with a rich and nuanced understanding of human bone as object and symbol. The volume’s inception, like many edited volumes, arose from a symposium originally presented at the 2008 Midwest Archaeological Conference. The 16 chapters are organized temporally, with main section headings: Woodland Period, Mississippian Period, Late Prehistoric Period, and a final section entitled Perspectives. This common organizational construct, while focusing on an arguably restricted geographic area, impressively avoids simplicity. Yes, there are similarities amongst and between populations in the Midwest throughout time and culture, but the chapter authors avoid relying on generalizations as a framework for analyses or interpretations. Much to the credit of the editors’ oversight and the authors’ skills, emphasis is placed upon providing detailed description of modified objects firmly rooted in context and theory.

The volume begins with seven chapters focusing on Woodland Period archaeological sites. Nawrocki and Emanovsky’s chapter, “A Taphonomic Analysis of Hopewellian Modified Trophy Jaws,” sets the stage for description and analysis by encouraging readers to adopt a forensic taphonomic model of analysis. By considering both ante-mortem and post-mortem processes of human bone, the concept of bone modification becomes surprisingly complex. Cobb’s chapter, “Objectifying Middle Woodland Mortuary Practices through the Inclusion of Modified Human Jaws: a Central Illinois River Valley Case
Study," provides the reader with detailed descriptions of 16 of the known 31 modified human jaws recovered from the central Illinois River valley, numerous tables that contextualize the finds, and means by which readers can compare objects from Indiana and Ohio. Johnston, in her chapter, "More than Skulls and Mandibles: Culturally Modified Human Remains from Woodland Contexts in Ohio," offers a history of the interpretation of modified bone in Hopewell contexts, as well as discussion of key hypotheses used to explain the meaning of the modified bone. This, along with analyses of the age and sex of individuals whose remains were culturally modified, and the age and sex of individuals interred with culturally modified human remains, allows both the author and reader to test the hypothesis and develop conclusions. Adding to the interpretation of Hopewell burials, Carr and Novotny in their chapter, "Arrangement of Human Remains and Artifacts in Scioto Hopewell Burials: Dramatic Rituals or Ritual Dramas?" deftly mesh sociocultural theory with bioarchaeological techniques. The result is a careful contextual analysis incorporating anthropologie de terrain, which seeks to understand intentions behind mortuary ritual through analysis of the cultural and biological processes. The next chapter by Lee and Johnston, entitled "Phallic Batons Made of Bone in the Collections of the Ohio Historical Society," explores the creation and symbolism of two artifacts resembling human phalli. Multiple interpretations of meaning are offered, with particular care being taken to avoid superficial conclusions. The final chapter in this section, "Excised and Drilled Human Bone from Eastern Iowa Woodland Sites," by Schermer and Lillie, places into context bone disks derived from human crania, and drilled human bone and teeth. The authors highlight the variable uses and potentially changing symbolic meaning of an object over time.

Mississippian Period artifacts are the focus of the next four chapters of the volume. Hargrave and Cook, in their chapter, "Life after Death," present biographies of two modified bones: an ulna and a femur. Seeking to determine the possible use of the femur, the authors present the results of an experiment designed to replicate the function of the object. They conclude that the femur was likely used as digging implement. In the following chapter by Zejdlik, entitled, "Opportunity Knocks: Nonritual Use of Human Bone at the Aztalan Site, Jefferson County, Wisconsin," the author carefully weaves multiple lines of evidence together in order to cautiously evaluate a recovered modified tibia. She asserts that the fragment is a flesher—a bone implement, most often fashioned from animal skeletal remains, which assisted in the removal of soft tissue from hides. Careful assessment of construct and context of this unique implement leads the author to conclude that the modified object was likely utilitarian and might provide insight into site occupation, human migration patterns, and social interaction. Adding to the complexity of interpretation of modified human bone, Cook and Munson, in their chapter, "Vessel, Ornament, Mask, or Rattle: Reconstructing a Mississippian Worked Bone Object from the Angel Site," offer a detailed description of a human cranial fragment displaying a terraced motif. By situating the object in careful archaeological context, paying close attention to analogues from other sites, and determining the anatomical position of the original unmodified bone fragment, the authors highlight the association between the object and the greater Mississippian community. Last in this section, Munson, Cook and Powell in their chapter, "Modification of Human Bone from Mississippian Caborn-Welborn Phase Sites in Southwestern Indiana and West-Central Kentucky," tackle the context and interpretation of five recovered modified human bones. Alongside descriptions of the objects, the authors provide a table outlining the presence of human remains from nine Caborn-Welborn sites. This contextualization serves as the foundation for their conclusion that the recovered modified bones were likely created for display.

The next section, focusing on objects associated with Late Prehistoric Period sites, contains four chapters. Hedman, in a chapter entitled, "Human Bone as Ritual
Anker Sites, Cook County, Illinois,” focuses on materials from two sites, but offers the reader a much-appreciated compendium of Oneota sites at which modified human bone have been recovered. This allows for comparisons regarding function, potentially shared beliefs, diversity and change over time. Blue, in her chapter, “Grooved Teeth from Red Wing Locality Sites and the Loss or Gain of Identity,” assesses 21 human teeth with modifications to the root recovered from four Red Wing sites in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Special attention is paid to the choice of tooth, leading the author, through statistical evaluation, to conclude that maxillary and anterior teeth were preferentially selected for modification. Careful discussion of the archaeological and cultural contexts of the objects leads the reader to the theoretical complexities of social persona and mortuary ritual. Lillie and Schermer’s chapter, “Design Motifs and Other Modifications of Human Bone from Iowa Late Prehistoric Oneota Sites,” offers detailed descriptions of purposefully modified human crania from four Oneota villages. Moving beyond these sites, the authors focus on common motifs and bone modifications throughout the Midwest, exploring the contexts and cultural meanings of the incised and polished bone.

The final section of the book, aptly labelled, “Perspectives,” is comprised of two chapters which offer the reader latitude to step back and absorb the complexity of interpreting human modified bone. Sundstrom, in the chapter entitled, “The Meaning of Scalping in North America,” uses ethnographic records to explore the many cultural contexts and varied meanings of scalping. The result is an argument for careful contextual analyses and clear understanding of the limiting (and often inappropriate) term “trophy.” Maria O. Smith provides an impressive final capstone to the volume in her chapter, “Contextualizing the Precolumbian Postcultural ‘Life’ of Modified Human Remains.” Here, the reader is suitably prompted to address the importance of emic and etic approaches in the evaluation and interpretation of modified human bone, and to consider the chasm between the ethnographic present and the archaeological past.

This edited volume is a superb resource for professionals and students alike. The editors have generously constructed regionally-based cultural-chronological maps of sites discussed within the chapters, allowing the reader to appreciate spatial associations. Each chapter, emphasizing artifact descriptions, in tandem with contextual and theoretical discourse, contributes to the cohesiveness and integrity of the volume. Importantly, variation and complexity are exalted here. Whether the authors are evaluating the culturally-laden word “trophy,” exploring the causes and variability of human bone modification, offering means to compare artifacts, sites, or regions, or outlining the difficulties in constructing cultural symbolism and meaning, the volume challenges complacency and convention at every turn. The editors and authors of this volume venture beyond descriptions of modified human bone that are argued as “transforming the dead;” they transform our discourse of both the living and the dead.


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Kennewick Man: The Scientific Investigation of an Ancient American Skeleton is a thorough and detailed examination of the skeletal remains that have been subjected to legal, ethical, and scientific debates since their discovery in 1996. Despite often heated arguments surrounding the topic, this volume presents the facts of the discovery and curation history of the remains, as well as legal battles, in an unbiased way. The authors express their personal opinions in some instances, but foremost is the presentation of facts and research. This volume is exemplary in the amount of data it makes available, and the inclusion of various researchers’ work on most research topics (e.g. estimations of ancestry from cranial and facial morphology and interpretations of skeletal indicators of injury). Interpretations of the osteological data gathered from Kennewick Man have varied, and all interpretations are presented for the reader’s consideration. While some chapters appeal to a broad public audience, the majority are aimed at the scientific community and are presented in both book chapter and journal article form.

The book is divided into the following sections: “Establishing Context,” “Studying Skeletal Evidence,” “Applying Technology to Interpretation,” “Incorporating Population Data,” “Learning from Early Holocene Contemporaries,”...