

Interview with

Debra Harry and the Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism

To the Indigenous people of Kennewick, Washington, he was *Techaminsh Oytpamanatityt* – ‘From the Land, the First Native’: the Ancient One. His body was accidentally exhumed from the ground where he had lain for over 9,000 years. The five American Indian tribes with ties to that land wanted his remains once again laid to rest. With thousands of other Native human remains sitting on dusty shelves in museums and institutions all over the US, the tribes were united in requesting his return to the earth so that his body could be given the respect it deserved.

But he is not a Native American, said the scientists. Just look at his head size. Indeed, said one, his cranium is like *Star Trek’s* Captain, Jean-Luc Picard. And the spear tip in his side looks like it has come from France. He has no affiliation with these five tribes. He appears to be Caucasian – a migrant, as are we all.

So the science journals and archaeological debates dubbed him ‘Kennewick Man’. And the courts rejected his repatriation. The Society for American Archaeology embraced their rejection as ‘restoring the balance between the interests of science and those of Native Americans’.

Yet this use of science was far more political – another attempt to sever the links that Native Americans have with their past in order to cut them off from any tangible claims in their present. Dispossess them from their ancestors and you can dispossess them from their claim on land. As Debra Harry explains: ‘Indigenous peoples live in resource-rich territories. If you can deny people access to their own ancestors and culture, then you can deny them access to their territories and resources. It’s all about ownership and control over resources.’

Debra Harry – a Northern Paiute Native American who grew up on the Pyramid Lake reservation in Nevada – spearheads the Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism (IPCB): an organization that she helped create, which assists Indigenous peoples to protect their genetic resources. When I speak with her, she has just returned from Brazil where she worked to demystify the language and practice of genetics for those whose very blood and bones are now vulnerable to exploitation.

‘In April this year the National Geographic Society and the IBM Corporation announced the launch of their five-year, \$40 million “Genographic Project”, which aims to collect, store and analyze 100,000 blood samples from Indigenous peoples around the world. The project will create a research database and new media for distribution that will undoubtedly generate new sources of revenue... [Those running the project] say they want to chart new knowledge about the migratory history of the human species and answer age-old questions surrounding the genetic diversity of humanity. They plan to pose questions such as: “Could Europeans have migrated to the Americas thousands of years ago?” and “Who are the Aboriginal

inhabitants of Indonesia?” The very basis of being Indigenous is that you are of the land. Our rights are based on our original inhabitation of the territories we occupy. So a claim that challenges the aboriginality of certain Indigenous people could pose a serious threat. Even though the results of this type of research are speculative, we have no doubt that these findings would be used as a political weapon against us.’

And a social weapon too. ‘Our oral histories tie us to the territories that we’ve occupied since the very beginnings of time,’ says Harry, describing the heritage that will also be challenged by the Genographic Project. Before the DNA of Indigenous peoples is sampled, they will be asked to sign a consent form saying: ‘It is possible that some of the findings that result from this study may contradict an oral, written or other tradition held by you or by members of your group.’ Harry is incredulous: ‘This is pitting one knowledge system against another. You can’t use one knowledge system to trump another!’

In stark contrast to this scientific approach, Harry explains how her traditional name links her to her past, present and future purpose. Her namesake – Eagle Horse Woman – means that she has a responsibility to be a warrior for her people. Like the eagle – that flies high and looks far ahead – her advocacy is heard on the reservations one day and at a United Nations conference in Brazil the next. And like the horse – carrying the burden of the people on her back – she is building a movement to protect indigenous knowledge, cultural and human rights from biotechnology piracy; travelling around the world to explain to Indigenous peoples how their genetic material can be misused.

‘They get it as soon as I compare indigenous systems with IPR (intellectual property rights of the kind that will underpin the Genographic Project). IPR is a specific body of Western property law in which our genetic material becomes a commodity that can be alienated. Monopoly rights are given to the inventor or innovator. It is a system that cannot – and will not – benefit us. [By contrast] the Indigenous view is that our genetic materials are sacred, inalienable and collectively owned, and our rights are inherent. While scientists may believe that they can define us, our wisdom – protected and passed down through the generations – will prevail.’

Debra Harry talked with Chris Richards

