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Unethical Use of 1985 MOVE Bombing Skeletal Remains Highlights Inequality in Death Investigations

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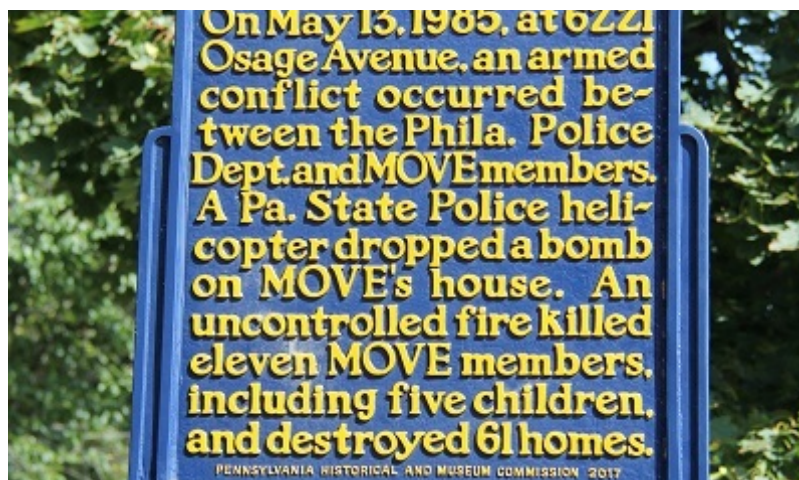
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As was recently publicized, the skeletal remains of at least one Black child were wrongfully retained for decades and used by [biological anthropologists to teach forensic anthropology](#). The details are still



developing; however, it appears this situation began when Alan Mann, a

biological anthropologist teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, was contacted to examine the remains of individuals killed by Philadelphia police in the 1985 MOVE bombing. For unknown reasons, rather than returning the skeletal material to the appropriate legal authority, Mann kept the remains in his possession, even after leaving to take a teaching position at Princeton University. These remains appear to have been shared between Princeton University and the University of Pennsylvania over the ensuing decades, culminating in their use as teaching material in at least one online course on forensic anthropology in 2019 by University of Pennsylvania biological anthropologist Janet Monge.

As practicing forensic anthropologists certified by the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA), we feel it necessary to speak out against this inexcusable mistreatment of human remains. Further, this case exposes several issues within the discipline of anthropology, namely systems of structural racism as well as the need to appreciate qualifications and ethical practice in forensic anthropology.

Structural violence of marginalized groups and racism in the United States permeate this case—from the initial bombing and murder of those within the building through how the remains were treated at the time of their discovery, their retention for decades, and ultimate use as teaching specimens. The remains of at least one Black child who entered the death investigation system as a result of race-based violence were able to be kept by a private citizen because of the marginalization and power differential between his position in society relative to those of the victims. This case highlights the unequal treatment in this country within death investigations and how the current system can serve to further disenfranchise marginalized and racialized groups. As forensic science practitioners, we need to be cognizant of these imbalances and push to create meaningful systemic change to ensure equity.

Further, the anthropologist implicated in this case who accepted the remains for forensic analysis does not have expertise in forensic anthropology. To allege that you are competent to perform forensic anthropological work without the appropriate qualifications is ethical misconduct. Unfortunately, unqualified practitioners are all too common in forensic anthropology and the forensic sciences in general. This is often due to funding shortfalls for investigative agencies, resulting in their inability to hire or retain qualified experts, as well as ignorance of appropriate qualifications on the part of some law enforcement agencies and medicolegal authorities. Forensic science, while interesting, is not a hobby. Conducting forensic anthropological work is a serious professional

undertaking that requires disciplinary expertise and an understanding of ethical behavior and the proper and respectful handling of human skeletal remains.

One way to demonstrate expertise and disciplinary competency is through certification. Obtaining certification demonstrates that you are competent to perform tasks associated with your profession, and that you will act ethically, as repercussions for misconduct can result in a loss of certification. The American Board of Forensic Anthropology is the only certifying body in the United States for forensic anthropologists and is accredited by the Forensic Science Accreditation Board (FSAB). To be certified by the ABFA means a practitioner has a doctoral degree in anthropology, experience in forensic anthropology, and has passed a rigorous examination consisting of both written and practical questions. Diplomates also adhere to a set of ethical codes and submit a signed code of conduct annually.

Due to a lack of qualifications and competency in forensic anthropology, the human remains of this Black child were mishandled with disregard to both evidence handling via chain of custody and the inappropriate retention of human tissues, violating the next of kin's right to sepulcher. In the United States, there are common laws that address the "right to sepulcher"; while the details of these laws vary by state, they generally provide the legally defined next of kin with the right to choose the final disposition of their deceased loved one. When the identity of an individual cannot be determined, the remains cannot be returned to the next of kin. In this instance, they must be returned to the office of the medicolegal authority until a next of kin can be established. Further, by not actively working to identify these remains and return them to the legally recognized next of kin, individuals of the MOVE community were not able to fully mourn this loss. Now, 35 years later, they are being forced to relive this atrocity with the discovery that these remains have been mistreated since their recovery.

We are glad to hear that Monge's online course has been suspended and that [Mann](#) has stated publicly that he will return the remains to the appropriate legal authority. However, this type of egregious mishandling of remains must never happen again.

We urge all anthropologists to conduct thorough audits of their collections to ensure all human remains were ethically obtained. While the use of real human bones is important for education and training in forensic anthropology, these bones must be sourced ethically, ideally from willed-body donors, similar to cadavers used for dissection at medical schools. If they discover human remains that were obtained under dubious circumstances and/or could be Ancestral remains of Tribal communities, then they must take immediate action to repatriate these remains—and they should not be used in instruction.

Finally, we must all actively investigate the systems of oppression that exist around us, including our own inherent biases. In regard to the forensic sciences specifically, we must be vigilant about the inequitable treatment of racialized and other marginalized groups, and work to make sure that everyone is treated equitably. Racism played a critical role in this situation, which must be recognized and acknowledged. At the same time, biological anthropologists, individuals who should be champions of humanity, were the primary actors in this dehumanizing scandal. As such, all anthropologists must recognize the need to examine their own conduct and expertise, and to ensure that we are acting in the best interests of the humans they are investigating, as well as their living kin and descendant communities.

Photo: Students at the Jubilee School, a private middle-school at 42nd and Chester streets, researched the 1985 MOVE bombing and successfully campaigned for the State Historical Marker installed on the southeast corner of Osage Avenue and Cobbs Creek Parkway in the summer of 2017. Credit: John L. Puckett

The perspectives expressed here are solely those of the authors, not any of the institutions with which they are affiliated.

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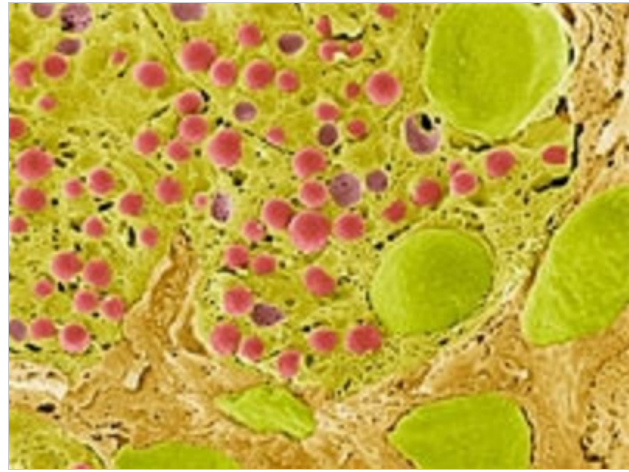
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