A Universal Story: Conversations with Richard Potts About Human Evolution Heritage*

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Abstract: This article derives from the conversation I had with Richard Potts in June 2023 about his work at the Human Origins Program of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (Washington D.C.). Dr. Potts is one of the most renowned paleoanthropologists for his research about early humans in Africa and the curation of the exhibit "What does it mean to be human?" at the NMNH. My primary objective was to explore his role in advancing our understanding of humanity's evolutionary heritage within the broader discourse on world heritage. The interview, conducted in Dr. Potts's office on June 9, 2023, was recorded and published with his informed consent. His insights shed light on various aspects of artifact acquisition, preservation, and interpretive guidance—key elements in the ongoing social and academic debates surrounding heritage. This includes a perspective rooted in the field of public archaeology that views its practice as a reflexive form of action, intended to raise awareness and foster interconnection between society and archaeological work. From this standpoint, museums serve as fundamental hubs in heritage creation, shaping aesthetic, ethnographic, archaeological,

* The interview was conducted as part of a visitor study carried out by the author in the Human Origins Hall, of which Richard Potts is the curator. The visitor study project is part of her doctoral research, titled "Process of constructing public knowledge regarding human evolution in the communication and education settings in Bahía Blanca and Punta Alta," funded by the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET). The study was evaluated and approved by the Smithsonian Institutional Review Board, has the formal approval of the Ethics Committee of Scientific and Technological Research of the National University of the South (Higher University Council of UNS. File Nº 3013/10, December 2022, *Reglamento de Funcionamiento del Comité de Ética de Investigación Científica y Tecnológica de la Universidad Nacional del Sur*) and respects the Ethical Behavior Guidelines in Social Science and Humanities from CONICET (CONICET. File Nº 5344/99, December 2006, *Lineamientos para el Comportamiento Ético en las Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades)*. The process of finalizing the interview was shared with Dr. Potts before being submitted for the editorial review of the journal. The transcription was done by the author. Last, this article is part of the Conicet projects PICT 2021-0116 PRÉSTAMO BID.

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and historical perspectives in alignment with historical agendas, preservation ideologies, conflicting memories, and particular values regarding exhibition, design, and display. They highlight the complex interactions between classification and preservation, the identity narratives they encompass, the scientific and political agendas that shape them, the international networks supporting them, and the communities they cultivate through Potts' vision.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, evolution, exhibitions, human species museum collections, natural history museums.

Una historia universal: conversaciones con Richard Potts sobre el patrimonio de la evolución humana

Resumen: este artículo se desprende de la conversación que sostuve en junio de 2023 con Richard Potts sobre su trabajo en el programa Orígenes Humanos del Museo Nacional de Historia Natural del Instituto Smithsoniano en Washington D. C. (NMNH, por su sigla en inglés). Richard Potts es uno de los paleoantropólogos más reconocidos por su investigación sobre los primeros humanos en África y por su curaduría de la exposición "¿Qué significa ser humano?", del NMNH. El objetivo principal de la entrevista era explorar el papel de Potts en el enriquecimiento de nuestra comprensión del patrimonio de la evolución humana, en el marco de una discusión más amplia sobre patrimonio mundial. La entrevista se llevó a cabo el 9 de junio de 2023 en la oficina de Potts, quien firmó un consentimiento informado y aprobó la grabación y posterior publicación de este diálogo. Su testimonio pone de relieve diferentes aspectos que son esenciales para los debates sociales y académicos sobre el patrimonio, como la adquisición, la preservación y los lineamientos de interpretación de los objetos. Sus declaraciones también nos ofrecen una aproximación al campo de la arqueología pública que comprende esta práctica como una forma reflexiva de acción que busca concientizar y fomentar la interconexión entre el trabajo arqueológico y la sociedad. Sobre la base de este enfoque, los museos actúan como núcleos fundamentales para la construcción de patrimonio, así como para la configuración de perspectivas estéticas, etnográficas, arqueológicas e históricas que responden a agendas históricas, a la preservación de ideologías, a memorias en conflicto y a unos valores particulares relacionados con la exposición, el diseño y el montaje. Mediante la mirada de Potts podemos observar la manera en que los museos resaltan la complejidad de las interacciones entre los asuntos de clasificación y preservación, las narrativas de identidad que engloban, las agendas científicas y políticas que los definen, las redes internacionales que los sostienen y las comunidades que cultivan.

Palabras clave: colecciones museográficas sobre especies humanas, evolución, exposiciones, museos de historia natural, patrimonio cultural.

Uma história universal: diálogo com Richard Potts sobre o patrimônio da evolução humana

Resumo: este artigo é o resultado de uma conversa que tive em junho de 2023 com Richard Potts sobre seu trabalho no programa *Human Origins* no National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) do Smithsonian, em Washington DC. Richard Potts é um dos mais renomados paleoantropólogos por sua pesquisa sobre os primeiros seres humanos na África e por sua curadoria da "O que significa ser humano?" do NMNH. O principal objetivo da entrevista foi explorar o papel de Potts no enriquecimento de nossa compreensão do patrimônio da evolução humana como parte de uma discussão mais ampla sobre o patrimônio mundial. A entrevista foi realizada em 9 de junho de 2023 no escritório de Potts, que assinou um termo de consentimento livre e esclarecido, em que aprovou a gravação e a posterior publicação desse diálogo. Seu depoimento destaca diferentes aspectos que são essenciais para os debates sociais e acadêmicos sobre patrimônio, como aquisição, preservação e diretrizes para a interpretação de objetos. Suas declarações também nos oferecem uma abordagem do campo da arqueologia pública que entende essa prática como uma forma de ação reflexiva que busca conscientizar e promover a interconexão entre o trabalho arqueológico e a sociedade. Com base nessa abordagem, os museus atuam como centros fundamentais para a construção do patrimônio, bem como para a configuração de perspectivas estéticas, etnográficas, arqueológicas e históricas que respondem a agendas históricas, à preservação de ideologias, a memórias conflitantes e a valores particulares relacionados à exposição, ao design e à montagem. Por meio do olhar de Potts, podemos ver como os museus destacam a complexidade das interações entre questões de classificação e preservação, as narrativas de identidade que abrangem, as agendas científicas e políticas que as definem, as redes internacionais que as sustentam e as comunidades que cultivam.

Palavras-chave: coleções museográficas sobre espécies humanas; evolução; exposições; museus de história natural; patrimônio cultural.

Richard Potts is a paleoanthropologist who has dedicated his life to studying and sharing knowledge on the human evolution heritage. He graduated from Temple University in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) and obtained his Ph.D. in Biological Anthropology at Harvard University (Massachusetts). After joining the Smithsonian Institution, he taught introductory courses in Anthropology and Biological Anthropology at Yale University (Connecticut) and served as the curator of Physical Anthropology at the

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Yale Peabody Museum. From an ecological perspective, his extensive research and fieldwork experience in Africa aim to explore human adaptation by studying environmental changes (Potts 1996). In 1976, he received permission from Dr. Mary Leakey to examine the faunal remains and stone tools from Leakey's excavations at Olduvai Gorge (Tanzania), and he then become involved in the interpretation of early human behavior and ecology. Since then, his books and articles have documented the evolution of his ideas and research. Particularly notable is *Humanity's Descent: The Consequences of Ecological Instability* (1996), in which he elaborates a theory of variability selection to explain significant evolutionary advancements in human history, such as bipedalism or the production of stone tools.

Despite Potts' significant contributions to academia, our conversation focused primarily on his work at the Smithsonian Institution. In 1985, he founded the Human Origins Program with the goal of creating the Hall of Human Origins in the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) in Washington D. C. As part of this project, he leads the traveling exhibition "Exploring Human Origins" and coordinates its tour across the U.S. A year before founding the program, Potts began his long-term fieldwork in *Olorgesaili*e (Kenya) with the permission of then Director of the National Museum of Kenya, Richard Leakey. With the visibility he had gained, his next goal was to secure funding for large scale excavations at the site (Selig 1999). Since then, he has been directing archaeological excavations at sites located in the East African Rift Valley, including *Olorgesailie*.

To conduct this interview, I met Dr. Potts in his office at the NMNH on June 9th, 2023. A few weeks earlier, I had begun a visitor study in the Hall as part of my ongoing doctoral research. Dr. Briana Pobiner and Dr. Potts both supported me in the assessment process and arranged this interview. My primary interest was to explore Dr. Potts's influence on human evolution heritage within the broader context on world heritage (Meskell 2015). When we met that day, even before I could ask to record the conversation, he directed our discussion toward a museum project involving community participation that he was actively engaged in. This set the stage and became the foundation for our conversation.

My questions were designed to explore his scientific practices across various realms of anthropological knowledge construction, his fieldwork, and the dilemmas he faced during the exhibit design process at the NMNH. Potts's narrative provides valuable insights into the decision-making involved in curating the Museum's collections. His insights shed light on various aspects of artifact acquisition, preservation, and interpretive guidance—key elements in the ongoing social and academic debates surrounding heritage.

To acknowledge these connections, we analyze the case of the Hall and the central question that organizes the materials: *What does it mean to be human?* The general concept of the exhibition is to create an interactive experience on the evolving history of hominin species, the emergence of modern humans and its imprint on climate change. Because of its anthropological content, it produces meanings about

humans and through them constructs past and present othernesses. In this definition of identities, it contributes to the strengthening or weakening of practices associated with a way of life.

Potts' experience reveals an international heritage dynamic linked to the global recognition of the Smithsonian Institution. This dynamic is comparable to the values and perspectives of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (Vrdoljak, Liuzza, and Meskell 2021). According to Potts, the Smithsonian Institution is moving toward a bilateral system of interinstitutional agreements focused on heritage. An example of this is the collaboration between the Nairobi Museum and the Human Origins Program, which involves anthropological and archaeological collections from early human habitation sites. Engaging in conversation with Potts opens up a realm of initiatives with decision-making authority over narratives of human origins. His experience serves as a valuable resource for analyzing the various logics, interests, and agents involved in heritage-making and for situating these processes within political and market frameworks that extend beyond traditional institutions like UNESCO (Meskell 2015) to include other actors such as the Smithsonian Institution.

Although human evolution remains a controversial topic in contemporary Western societies, Potts views it as an opportunity for dialogue, the pursuit for common ground, and the acknowledgment of our shared origins. This perspective inspired the title of the article.

To conclude this introduction, I want to extend my gratitude to Dr. Richard Potts for his unwavering dedication to this project. I would also like to express my deep appreciation to Dr. Briana Pobiner for her invaluable support throughout the entire process; without her assistance, the meeting would not have been possible.

Interviewing Dr. Potts

The following interview took place on June 9, 2023, in Dr. Potts's office. That Friday afternoon, I arrived at the NMNH, where he warmly welcomed me and shared insights about his current projects through informal conversation. After obtaining his permission to record, I turned on my recorder and started with the questions.

Camila Marinetti (CM): *I want to ask you about the relationship between your fieldwork and the local museums in Africa.*

Richard Potts (RP): Wherever I begin my work, I take responsibility for the field research. What matters most is establishing infrastructure in the host country which welcomed me to care for the collections. In the case of our long-term research in Kenya, those are Kenyan collections. They should not be here. It has been very interesting to try to convince the people in our museum here in Washington D.C that I am the curator of about 100,000 objects that we have excavated from field sites in Kenya, but they are not here. Instead, when I got to the Smithsonian in 1985, I tried to lay the groundwork for developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and agreement between the Smithsonian and the National Museums of

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Kenya for training at PhD level, but also the training of museum professionals, including people who engage in exhibit design and collections management in the paleontology and archeology laboratories in Kenya. Because I knew that those are materials, heritage, that belongs in Kenya. Over the years, within the framework of the MOU, we have trained five PhDs, the students in four master's degrees, and about twenty-five people in various museum roles, all the way from collections management and exhibit design to Geographic Information Systems.

CM: *Do you have a part of the collection in the Nairobi Museum and a part here in Washington?*

RP: The only things that we have in Washington are things that the Nairobi Museum refers to as *Show and Tell*,[1] for education purposes. This includes emblematic discoveries from Kenya. It is our way of helping to promote the objects in the Kenyan Museum. For that, it has been a vital relationship. We provide funds every year that have gone towards repairing the roof over the Paleontology Lab, the ceiling, make sure that there are no leaks that could cause damage during the rainy season; and the upgrading of the Site Museum,[2] one of the most visited outside of Nairobi, connected with the archaeological site.

CM: *You are describing different aspects of your job. How do you envision your work at the Smithsonian?*

RP: There is a very interesting and strong relationship between the research and the exhibit. I remember some years ago at a conference, when the director of one of the Smithsonian museums said that we can create an exhibit about anything we want in the world, because we have the power to tell the story. He said that we could even look in an encyclopedia and build an exhibit. I was the next speaker, and I threw away my notes and argued that the mission of the Smithsonian is to increase and spread knowledge, to produce discoveries and knowledge, and make them available to the public. One thing is to have the power to tell the story, another thing is to have the authority to do so. There is no authority to tell it without also doing and participating in the research. This perspective has been a strong motivator for me to develop a robust research program tied to the responsibility of making that information available to the public. When it came to the exhibit, my greatest challenge as curator was to write to colleagues, governments, and museum officials in forty-eight countries to assemble the replicas, the original materials, and the models that are presented in the Hall. It was astonishing how quickly everyone responded. The Smithsonian's reputation is widely recognized, but without our active involvement in research in the field, there would not have been the same response. There are museums around the world that acknowledge our legitimacy and trust us to organize exhibitions that incorporate information from their respective countries.

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1 *Show and tell* is how teachers in the United Kingdom or United States refer to the practice of showing something to an audience and describing it to them.

2 He refers to the Site Museum located in *Ollorgesailie*. Web-page : https://museums.or.ke/olorgesailie/

CM: *Throughout your extensive career as a researcher, how have you balanced your academic pursuits with your efforts in science communication? How do you manage these two distinct facets of scientific activities?*

RP: I was immersed in academia from college through graduate school and then my PhD. My first job was teaching at Yale University, where I was very happy and taught for four years. During that time, however, the opportunity to develop a human origins program at the Smithsonian came up, and I applied for the position. I was fortunate to be offered the job.

CM: *Wasn't there an exhibition of human evolution already at the NMNH?*

RP: There was a small exhibition that some of the people from George Washington University had put together, but it was very much out of date. It was from the early 1960s. And there had been no curator in human evolution. The anthropology department and this museum decided that they wanted to incorporate the study of human origins in the Smithsonian's scholarship. I was already starting my field research in East Africa and had already finished my dissertation, which made my background appealing to the Smithsonian. I almost decided not to come because academia was my comfort zone. Indeed, I was very happy at Yale, and they wanted to keep me. But I realized that for the first time I had the opportunity to work on human evolution at the US National Museum, the most visited natural history museum in the world. That was too good an opportunity to miss and I felt confident about the responsibilities of public engagement. And so that bring me to your question: when I was at Yale, for some reason, reporters would call me all the time whenever there was a new discovery, not because I was making the discoveries, but because they saw me as someone who could provide commentary and perspective. I already felt comfortable in that role, and I think the Smithsonian did too, because research alone was not enough. The public engagement side is very important. So, I decided to leave Yale where I was teaching hundreds of undergraduates every year in Introduction to Anthropology and Introduction to Biological Anthropology, but I knew that this would be a place where I could engage a broader scope, and diversity of people.

CM: *What were your first years of work like?*

RP: I decided to leave Yale, and I arrived here in 1985. By 1986, we had developed a statement of purpose for the exhibit hall. We began meetings in 1988 to establish the Hall of Human Origins. But in 1990, a change in the Department of Exhibits and Public Program stopped our project for almost 15 years, which is why I decided to rebuild the museum on the *Olorgesailie site* because it was in poor condition. I know I would do research at *Olorgesailie* for some more years, so our team built a new museum and exhibit displays. I did it with the National Museums of Kenya because it is all local labor, and it is inexpensive compared to a major exhibit here. I felt like it was still my responsibility to get our information out to some public.

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CM: *What was the problem at the NMNH?*

RP: Our Development Office was very good at raising money for one project at a time, rather than several projects at a time. There was always a queue for which exhibit would be next. We were always number two or number three, bouncing back and forth. We were basically about to go ahead when a very important donor to the museum, Kenneth Behring, came forward. He wanted to build a Hall of Mammals, and that is how it got built. Again, we got bumped down to second or third. We finally had a new Director, Dr. Cristián Samper, who created a new strategy during the time he worked (2003-2022). At first, he came to me and said: "I've heard everything about what your goals have been. And your research. And why are you still here?"

CM: *It is a good point.*

RP: I told him that I had been able to engage in research in Kenya, in China, in Ethiopia, because there is nothing like the Smithsonian's name to inspire trust in other countries. But he was asking me about the exhibition at the Hall and he promised he would do something about it. He facilitated conversations with the Secretary of Smithsonian and the staff, the head of the whole Institution, and we discussed things. These conversations included the congressional liaison, because I made it very clear that is a subject that could be controversial to the public, and that members of Congress might be hearing about from their public. We began discussing our approach to handling potentially controversial issues. During these conversations, I received training to help me effectively address religious objections to the subject.

CM: *Have you seen any other exhibition that was doing something about the controversy?*

RP: There are not many exhibits about human evolution in the United States of America. There are about five or six in major museums. There is one in San Diego,[3] one in Kansas,[4] another one at Harvard University,[5] and of course, the New York American Museum of Natural History.[6] But there are very few in public museums. Academically and intellectually, I was raised to understand that this subject was challenging and often framed as a matter of conflict. To my mind, I had already undergone a process of examining how a religious perspective, as well as other philosophical viewpoints, could approach the study of origins through the lens of scientific discoveries—reflected in the documents that I had already produced. I showed them the approach that included developing an advisory committee called

3 He refers to the exhibition "Origins" that was at the San Diego Natural History Museum. Web-page: https://www.sdnhm.org/exhibitions/

4 The Biodiversity Institute and Natural History Museum belongs to the University of Kansas and evolution is integrated as a theme in its exhibits. Web-page : https://biodiversity.ku.edu/nhm-from-home

5 The Harvard Museum of Natural History is a university museum that focuses primarily on evolution in its exhibitions. Web-page : https://hmnh.harvard.edu/evolution

6 It is well known the importance of the human evolution exhibit in the American Museum of Natural History located in New York. Web-page : https://www.amnh.org/

the Broader Social Impacts Committee.[7] I had been engaged, since the late 1990s, with the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), which published the *Science* journal, and I had been on their committee of dialogue on science, ethics, and religion for six years. We had meetings to discuss the intersection between these topics four times a year. One of my responsibilities was to introduce our plan for a Hall of Human Origins to the individuals there who were from many faith denominations around the country. I even showed them some initial design ideas from the 1980s and 1990s.

CM: *So, they became engaged in the conversation about the approach of the Hall of Human Origins.*

RP: I brought them into that. I remember one individual, a Jewish rabbi who became a close friend. After my presentation to the AAAS group, the dialogue group pointed out that the question "*what does it mean to be human?"* was a question of meaning, and a matters of religion, not science. I agreed with them and that is precisely why it is posed as a question and not a statement. This isn't an exhibit about what it means to be human; it is a theme of the exhibit—a question that we do not even attempt to answer. We aim to understand peoples' views on this question and integrate them into the framework of a scientific exhibit. This approach allows visitors to engage with science while contemplating their personal understandings of humanity, influenced by various factors such as religious perspectives. When the group heard my answer, they stated: "This is the right approach to the exhibit. The question is the right theme for the exhibit." This also takes me back to my undergraduate teaching at Yale. It was a lecture course, but sometimes I just listened and posed questions to the students. Within a few minutes, a full dialogue would emerge among 150-200 people in the auditorium, each sharing their views on what it means to be human. I was always struck by the fact that the subject of human evolution is often seen as controversial only from the science standpoint. If science is part of society, it should engage with society on society's terms, rather than dictating what everyone should think.

CM: *How were these conversations expressed in the creative process of building the exhibition? How did you handle these conversations on a matter as enormous as human evolution that is always controversial?*

RP: At the Smithsonian, exhibits are means of informal education, informal engagement. Just putting out objects and expecting people to learn from those objects, though, is not an effective approach. Among other topics, the subject of the relationship between science and religion should be a conversation. There are three main approaches that we took. Number one is that we were able to raise the funding

7 The Broader Social Impacts Committee, an initiative of the Human Origins Program, brings together scientists and religious leaders from various faiths, dedicated to feed the dialogue between evolutionary theory and diverse worldviews. For further information, please visit: https://humanorigins.si.edu/about/broader-social-impacts-committee

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for our website. We involved the Broader Social Impacts Committee to show the different models of religious people and their various philosophical perspectives, allowing them to express their personal standpoints, as to how they view human evolution, and the opportunities for conversation and the possibility for reconciliation. Building the website was vital because the exhibit needed something behind it. We could direct people there to explore, investigate and hear the voices of individuals who were not scientists, with regard to that particular matter.

The second area was the theater area, the *One Species Worldwide* theater.[8] The original plan was that every other month, we would have a public program that was focused on Broader Social Impacts and open it up for a town hall type of conversation, in which a member of our committee from a religious perspective or someone else from the Washington DC area would be there to talk for 15-20 minutes. We had that space organized not only for the video, but also for conversations about what can be difficult topics. One of the most interesting ones took place when we had a Catholic priest. He came in his priestly robes, and people were walking by asking themselves why he was talking at the Hall. A priest was talking here in front of everyone, and many people wondered what was going on. Fortunately, people just came and sat down, listened, and wanted to engage in the conversation. We were trying to conduct a grand experiment, and it showed that, even though conflict based on division or separation prevails in society, it is possible to create an environment of conversation where people take turns and speak with one another respectfully.

Third, we created the *Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQ's)[9] resource at the exhibit, as part of the logistic computer kiosk, where people can participate and give offer their views on science and religion and ask questions. Briana Pobiner, who leads the Human Origins Program's education and outreach efforts, plays a key role in terms of answering all the questions that come in. I have also had many opportunities to speak on religious radio talk shows, as well as to religious audiences in other contexts regarding the science of human evolution. It is really this combination, because if you are in academia, you cannot really do it very well. There is the ivory tower, the boundary between the university and its scholarship, and society. I wanted to break out of that and was able to do so by coming to the Smithsonian.

CM: *You mentioned the objects. I have seen that in the exhibition, there are not only archaeological fossils, artifacts, and replicas but also statues and busts with face reconstructions. How do you think that these objects help to communicate archaeology?*

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8 The *One Species Worldwide* theater, situated within the Hall, offers seating arrangements facing a central screen for audiovisual presentations. Adjacent to the Mammals Hall, it is the end of the exhibition. For a visual map of the Hall, visit the Web-page: https://humanorigins.si.edu/exhibit/exhibit-floorplan/exhibit-floorplan-interactive

9 The *Frequently Asked Questions* is a resource used in the Hall to provide updated information on questions posed by the public. These questions are also uploaded to the Program's Webpage: https://humanorigins.si.edu/education/frequently-asked-questions

RP: Connection. Connection to the subject. The bronze statues were made so that the public could touch and climb on them. We also wanted to have touchable objects in the exhibit. For example, in the introductory area, where we have the five skulls that you can rotate, people can put their hands on them.

CM: *Were the bronze statues your idea or something that you worked out with other artists?*

RP: The artwork was done by the Paleo-artist John Gurche. He was a part of the starting crew in 1988.

CM: *In which way do you think they are successful?*

RP: It is easy in a natural history museum to make a mistake. And the mistake is to get people, the visitors, to think of, when we talk about people, as the *others*. My concern, as an anthropologist, is that a visitor can see them as peoples from other lands, other places in the world. But they see it as *interesting* because they are *exotic*, they are separate from themselves. It is unfamiliar. This always bothered me, and I wished for people to explore the concept of their own humanity, so we provide some tools for creating a connection. When we were assembling the Hall, there was a discussion about whether or not to keep the *Face Morphing Station*.[10] Part of the team pointed out that there was no room for it, and I insisted on keeping it. I argued that it was a way in which people can begin to imagine themselves as early humans. Even though it may be just for fun, there is still an act of choosing who to merge themselves with to look like an early human. Although this may sound insignificant in some ways, the background is a decision that the visitor makes to connect with a particular species. That bridge is critical in the exhibit. I was not going to sacrifice that. In combination with the possibility to touch objects that are made from durable materials, this creates a tactile or some sort of emotional connection with the visitors: the statues, that you can climb on; the busts, despite being behind glass, are the same height as the individuals; and the booth.

The *Snapshots in Time*[11] were thought up in the same way. When we started in 2006, the designers asked me if I wanted dioramas. Ironically, the things I study are already dead, so a static diorama was not the best choice. We needed action. Together with the design firm, we developed a very good concept that goes back to the statement of purpose we wrote in 1986, which emphasizes the importance of interaction. They came up with some interesting ideas, linking our fieldwork to the Hall for the public with a proposal that includes interactive resources. I think the

10 *Face Morphing Station* is an interactive booth designed to digitally transform the visitor's face into one of an early human. Richard also refers to the Station as "The booth." To know more, visit: https://humanorigins.si.edu/exhibit/exhibit-floorplan/exhibit-floorplan-interactive

11 As of June, 2024, Human Origins' home page expresses that the *Snapshots in Time* are three immersive media experiences located in the Hall that aim to unveil the survival challenges faced by three different early human species living at three different times and places.

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most successful of the *Snapshots in Time* is the one with Jennifer Clark[12] in the Neandertal burial. I have seen people cry and get very emotional about the sepulture. The idea that a Neandertal burial could create such a reaction is wonderful; it engenders the emotional connection we wished for.

CM: *You talked about the Neanderthal, and I must ask you about the skeleton on display. Why did you decide to put the Neanderthal skeleton in the exhibition? Why not use a replica? What did you want to provoke in the public, placing it in that quiet, dark place?*

RP: We wanted to create a contrast to show that there is a story to be told from a complete skeleton of the actual authentic individual. The lighting inspires due respect for an individual who has, in fact, died. It contrast from the bright lights shone on all the other objects. There is an individual whose remains are being conserved. We know the story of this individual: how they died, that they had arthritis, what they ate, that they were male. Of course, there is a purpose to displaying an actual fossil to convey authenticity.[13] But more importantly, without the fossils, the stories of these individuals would never be told. They would be lost forever. This is why we wanted to display the *real* skeleton for the public. It has been engaging; for example, the ambassador of Iraq came to see it and he was proud that a part of Iraqi heritage was being shown here. Shanidar cave holds deep significance for the Kurdish people of Iraq. They visit it on pilgrimages, recognizing it as a site where Neanderthals were buried. While Neanderthals are not direct ancestors of people today, Iraqi visitors to Shanidar see it as a place of ancestry and heritage, where their prehistory has been uncovered there.

By the 1950s, we ended up with a skeleton quite by accident when the Smithsonian and the Iraqi Bureau of Antiquities were doing the excavation in Shanidar cave[14]. According to the agreement, the Smithsonian was to get animal remains, archaeological artifactual stone tool remains, and soils. Half of that was retained in Iraq. In one of the blocks of sediment that came over full of animal remains, there turned out to be the Neanderthal skeleton.

The Iraqi Bureau of Antiquities requested that the Smithsonian Institution retain the bones and focus on their preservation. At that time, no human evolution work was being conducted at the NMNH, so Dale Stewart, the curator, asked Eric

12 Jennifer Clark holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Ethnology from the University of Georgia and works as a Museum Specialist in the Human Origins Program. What Potts is referring to is the audiovisual presentation where Clark narrates the death of the Neanderthal in the Shanidar Cave and discusses the various interpretations.

13 Potts refers to the ongoing inquiry and debates regarding the issue of authenticity in museums. Some of the topics related are object acquisition, museum responsibility towards their communities of origin, and the significance of objects within the museum context. An essential book for approaching this theme is the compilation by Karp and Lavine (1991) titled *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, published by the Smithsonian Institution Press.

14 Shanidar Cave, situated in Iraqi Kurdistan, is an archaeological site renowned for the discovery of ten Neanderthal bodies dating back over 50,000 years. Excavations started in the 1950s and continue today.

Trinkaus[15] to study it with permission from the Iraqi officials. He provided excellent care, carrying out much of the conservation work himself. I met the Shanidar-3 skeleton at Harvard University where I did my PhD work. Eric Trinkaus was one of my two advisors in graduate school. I had no idea how significant it would be to see the skeleton return here. When I started with the Program, Eric, who had moved from Harvard to University of Albuquerque, brought the skeleton back to the Smithsonian.

After the skeleton's return, the Museum invited twenty young Iraqi museum professionals to the Smithsonian for training. They were not aware that we had the skeleton. During one session in the Rose Seminar room right down the Hall, they were all gathered, and we brought out the Shanidar-3 skeleton. They were absolutely amazed. We also showed them the documentation from the Iraqi head of the Bureau of Antiquities, confirming that the skeleton had been housed at the Smithsonian for a long time already. This was especially appreciated because, in 1991, the US operation called Desert Storm bombed Baghdad in Iraq. The head of the Bureau of Antiquities called Eric Trinkaus and was reassured that the skeleton had already been sent back to the Smithsonian. Fortunately, someone knew the value of the Shanidar Neanderthal remains. There were nine other skeletons that were moved out of Baghdad to protect them from damage. The Iraqi officials said it was very fortunate at least Shanidar-3 was protected at the Smithsonian. Museums are spaces in which we try to preserve things, even the remains of a different species. Unfortunately, some museums have been casualties of warfare, damaged and bombed, and a lot was lost in World War Two in Europe.

CM: *Since its opening in 2010, has the exhibition changed in any way? Or do you have any projects that might change or increase the educational work of the Hall of Human Origin?*

RP: Scientifically, one of the things that has been a very big development is the ancient DNA work. The exhibit opened in March 2010, and two months later, we had a complete draft of the Neanderthal genome, then completed later that year. Also, the Denisovan genome was uncovered from fragments found in a cave in Russia and Siberia. To introduce the new information, we put up a small panel of all ancient DNA, next to the Neanderthal Snapshot. During COVID, we fell way behind because we were not able to add anything and there was no staff to help put it together. But we are slowly catching up. Also, the dates have changed due to new geochronological dating of the age of Extinction of Neanderthals, of *Homo erectus*, and *Homo floresiensis*. Even in the tunnel that you walk into from the Ocean side,[16] all those dates

15 Eric Trinkaus is an internationally renowned paleoanthropologist specializing in Neanderthals. Throughout his career, he has taught at prestigious universities in the US and has trained numerous professionals dedicated to the study of human evolution, including Potts during his Ph.D. research years at Harvard University.

16 He refers to the *Time Tunnel* that connects the Ocean Hall to the Hall of Human Origins. According to Potts, here is where the exhibition starts. To see an interactive floorplan, visit: https://humanorigins.si.edu/exhibit/exhibit-floorplan/exhibit-floorplan-interactive

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have been changed, so we replaced the entire mural to correct the dates. Another issue is that whenever an exhibit goes up, certain elements may not meet our design expectations. For instance, the lighting on the Shanidar Neanderthal fossil skeleton is darker than we would like. We have a lighting strategy in place to ensure visitors can better view the remains.

CM: *So, new discoveries might change the exhibition in the future. But what about the interaction with visitors, the questions they ask, is there anything in particular that you are paying attention to?*

RP: We have the volunteers out on the floor and Briana has done a fantastic job of organizing them. She is the mastermind behind putting the training together of a highly engaged group of people who have been with us since we started in 2009-2010, before the Hall even opened. They engage with the public, they listen to the public, they are our ears out in the exhibit hall. They are so important to the whole experience of the exhibit because it is not enough to have an object and a visitor wandering in and expecting something magical to be passed on. Volunteers are ears to new questions and different opinions. The other approach is the FAQs, which Briana stays on top of. There is always something new in the exhibit, especially on the video screen where we present recently published discoveries, and there is always a question we have not heard before. But the exhibit design and the order of presentation works very well.

CM: *Do you think that knowledge on human evolution could help people to better understand some of their current problems?*

RP: The whole reason of the exhibit hall is to engage people in exploring the universals of being human. Throughout all of history, people have defined themselves according to divisions and the ways in which they differ from other people. The divisions people make with one another can develop in mere centuries or decades; but our commonality and shared history has been 6 million years in the making. We think this message is important to understand. This museum offers an opportunity to explore that. The things that unite us more than divide us. School and university groups come through the exhibit precisely to explore that question, to make a point about the universals, the history, and evolutionary history that all people share. It is all part of our biology, our culture, the ways in which we interact with the world. We hope visitors to the museum are fascinated with this subject because it is part of our universal story, the story of everyone. In some ways, this is more of a philosophical point. The reason why we tell origin stories is because it helps identify some aspects of our identity, and that is true for the origin stories of every society on the planet. We have taken the opportunity to tell a story that is not part of any one culture. It is not part of any single people's identity. But we hope it is part of people's identity. It is a story that is going to be changing. It is not the same kind of origin story that never changes. It is a true story that is based on what science is, which is a kind of impermanence. Even though the objects themselves are permanent, once they are

discovered or understood, you hope that they will be around for a long time. But the way of putting the story together, the narrative, the things that come from scientific study, and new understandings of our own humanity will keep changing. One thing that will not change is that it is a universal story. And so, we hope that it might sink in for some people.

Conclusion

Potts' perspective offers valuable insights into understanding heritage-making processes within broader discussions about knowledge construction and its circulation. Beyond detailing his academic journey, he introduces us to the global heritage pathways and the discourses that underpin them in museum contexts (Smith 2011). These cultural processes that produce knowledge and heritage have been the object of public archaeology, a field that views its practice as a reflexive form of action, designed to raise awareness and foster interconnection between society and archaeological work (Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos 2009; Merriman 2004; Salerno 2013). In alignment with the goals of public archaeology, the dialogue with Potts explores his practice as a communicator. This perspective is invaluable for fostering a holistic understanding of knowledge that captures the logics of heritage activation and the creation of new meanings around materialities (Appadurai 1986; Latour 2007; Funari and Bezerra 2012).

From this perspective, museums operate as fundamental centers in the construction of heritage, shaping aesthetic, ethnographic, archaeological, and historical perspectives according to historical agendas, preservation ideologies, conflicting memories, and particular values regarding exhibition, design, and display (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992; Pearce 1994). In this sense, it is important to understand these spaces of communication as forms of culture where the tension between the dynamic contexts in which objects circulate and the static tendencies inherent to museum settings happens (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992).

A useful lens for examining the heritage agendas of the Human Origins Program is to consider its operations within a cosmopolitan, transnational, and urban context shaped by issues related to public and private spheres, global tourism market, cultural policies and legislation, and academic research agendas (Meskell 2012). In this context, the Iraqi provenance of Neanderthal fossils serves as a case for considering heritage in its multiple connections and semantics, enmeshed within a political and commercial scenario and shaped by multi-scale and interjurisdictional legislative developments, humanitarian agreements, and cultural policies (Meskell 2015). The management, conservation, and exhibition of the remains is a clear example of the transformation in their definitions and uses through its life (Appadurai 1986; García 1999; Joyce and Gillespie 2015), which demands a reevaluation of certain tendencies that view heritage as a set of solidarities expressing shared worldviews. In this sense, Potts' account of the remains discovered at Shanidar-3

supports the interpretation of these heritage objects as hybrids (García 1989; Haraway 2015) and compositions (Latour 2008) that shape our knowledge of the world and configure ways of doing and understanding the past and present (Godsen 2005; Hodder 2012; Menezes 2014). In these terms, we can raise questions about their biographical possibilities (Kopytoff 1986) from the moment they are valued as archaeological heritage for all humanity.

Additionally, the location of human evolution heritage raises discussions about dominant modes of regulation and understanding within the global heritage framework. Recent years have seen a growing body of studies intended to shed light on its conditions of production in a context of neoliberalism, multi-scale, and multi-sectoral assemblages of governmental regulation, and the expansion of human rights policies (Coombe and Weiss 2015). In this context, the transnational nature of cultural circuits requires an open-minded gaze on new territories and agents that activate, evoke, and decide about these objects on the formation of collections, as Potts' actions demonstrate. His institutional participation operates through a similar cosmovision to the one established by UNESCO (Meskell 2015). While Potts' testimony provides substantial and unique insights into reconstructing these trajectories, certain hypotheses remain regarding these interactions, interests, and strategies involved in acquiring objects within the framework of this global heritage regime.

Following the cultural itineraries of these materialities, museum narratives constitute a new context of meaning that supports the authorized patrimonial discourse (Smith 2011). In this regard, Potts highlights the curatorial challenge of achieving a homogeneous narrative of our shared human history, one that integrates a vast array of hyper-specialized archaeological and paleoanthropological studies conducted over decades (Potts 2010). Some studies concerned with curatorial modalities have identified patterns related to teleological temporalities, the juxtaposition of Black prehistory and White modernity, and typologies and racial hierarchies (Bennett 2004; Scott 2012, 2007). In their view, these decisions often obstruct a plural vision of temporalities that coexist in our evolution and prevent the imagination of other possible scenarios for our species. From another perspective, the intelligible power of human evolution has also been recognized in an era of cognitive fragmentation, due to the integrative nature of the narrative and the consciousness it enables of ourselves as humans in the world (Ponce de León 2017). Its epistemic potential is linked to a reflection on our existence, as living beings that live in groups and construct meaning from our experience of moving and creating places (Ingold 2000). This tension between human universality and diversity is a complex theme that not only permeates this particular exhibit but is also central to a longstanding debate within anthropological theory itself in its disciplinary history.

Potts' testimony is invaluable for offering a nuanced perspective on human evolution, emphasizing how contested knowledge and materialities shape various notions of humanity, nature, and temporality within the context of an exhibit on our origins. In conveying this heritage, the interview reveals the complex interplay

between classification and preservation concerns, the identity narratives involved, the scientific and political agendas that drive them, the international networks that support them, and the communities they create. Through this, Potts' legacy has the power to inspire new questions about the meaning of our existence, grounded in scientific evidence that is a shared heritage for all.

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