

"The Spirit Is a Bone:" Reading Schele, Ozeki, O'Keeffe

UC-Irvine Department of Anthropology Colloquium

Thursday, Oct. 11, 2018
3:30-5:00pm SBSG 1517

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In 1968, the late artist Linda Schele (1942-1998) completed an M.F.A. in studio art at the University of Cincinnati. The painting submitted for her thesis abstracts the morphology of a deer skull into a surrealist scene intended to evoke interplanetary travel. Over the course of the next decade, Schele turned from studio art to Maya hieroglyphic decipherment, but she remained profoundly engaged with bones and cosmic visions. This talk refigures anthropological and philosophical considerations of mortality, spirit-worlds, and history by exploring Schele's relations with bones – as objects and signs – in an ethnographic mood. Bringing Schele's work into dialogue with the osteological attachments of novelist Ruth Ozeki and visual artist Georgia O'Keeffe, I show how bones emerge as objects of kinship, art, and history that creatively sustain forms of life rather than merely signifying death. This ethnographic consideration of bone as vibrant spiritual matter questions long-standing philosophical treatments of bone as the antithesis of spirit, exemplified by G. W. F. Hegel's derisive characterization of phrenology as a claim that "the Spirit is a bone."



Matthew C. Watson works at the nexus of the anthropology of science and the history of anthropology. He has published on the artistic, spiritual, and scientific bases of Maya hieroglyphic decipherment in journals that include American Anthropologist, Social Studies of Science, Cultural Critique, and Theory, Culture & Society. This research transects scholarly discussions of spirits and cosmology, language ideology, secularism, the politics of science, affect, and ethnographic form. His current book project is titled Elogy for an Edgewalker: The Spirits of Hieroglyphic Decipherment.

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