

Gabriola SOUNDER, p.24, October 15, 1999 [now possibly out-of-date, but links added]

## So where are you from?

I have been living on Gabriola Island now for almost a year, and still think of myself as a newcomer. Probably will for another year or two yet. A sense of place comes slowly, but it eventually comes. John Steinbeck, in his book, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, remarks that asking an Indian about the country seemed like asking him a question about himself. “They seem to be a dreaming people,” he wrote, “they seem to live on remembered things, to be so related to the seashore and to the rocky hills and to the loneliness, that they are those things.”

Some say the Native people among us in Canada came from Asia, 11,500 years ago, as if they didn't really belong here. That's always odd I think. Eleven thousand years is far longer than the English have lived in England, the Greeks in Greece, or even the Hebrews in Palestine. We all came from somewhere else, unless you happen to live in East Africa. East Africa? It's where the most recent genetic, paleo-anthropological, mitochondrial DNA, and linguistic evidence all suggest is the homeland of our species. We're all Africans really it seems. Black Africans haven't *acquired* melanin to protect themselves from the sun—it's we white folk that have lost it.

The “where are you from?” question has been especially interesting of late because of the controversy over [Kennewick Man](#). If you haven't heard it, the story, very briefly, goes like this. In July 1996, a forensic archaeologist was called to investigate an almost intact human skeleton found in the riverbank near Kennewick, Washington State. The skeleton looked like that of a Eurasian, not a Native American; however, the first radiocarbon dating measurements showed him to be 9,300 years old—not a typical result for European-like remains in the Americas! These tests are only now being repeated to confirm the findings because, in the meantime, Kennewick Man has become the subject of a court battle. The Army Corps of Engineers want to return the skeleton to the Umatilla First Nation in whose traditional territory it was found. If this happened, the skeleton would be reburied without further testing. A group of scientists, and inevitably I suppose in the United States, a few religious pseudo-historians, are trying to prevent this, at least until the skeleton and its DNA have been analyzed more completely. Personally, I like to think that Kennewick Man was an ancient anthropologist who got lost in the bush, and who would be as excited as I am that his bones are up for analysis. Cultural concerns of First Nations need not conflict with scientific curiosity as was admirably demonstrated by the recent agreement between the Champagne/Aishihk and B.C. over the respectful management of the [iceman](#) found in a glacier in the Tetchenshini-Elsek Park. Canadian common sense, one could smugly add, evidently didn't just arrive here with the first immigrants.

Even if Kennewick Man tells us no more about where he came from, we know that he was not alone. Spirit Cave Man was unearthed near Pyramid Lake in western Nevada in 1940, and radiocarbon dating has shown him to be 9,400 years old. Spirit Cave Man, like Kennewick Man, has startlingly European-like features, lacking the broad face and prominent cheekbones of Chinese and Native American people. Two similar, but slightly younger skeletons have also

been found in Minnesota. Other intriguing archaeological finds include stone tools made using Solutrean technology which was developed in France and the Iberian peninsula; and weavings that closely resemble the textiles made by the Ainu, the indigenous Caucasoid people of Japan. The textbook version of the first peopling of North America by immigration across the Siberian-Alaska land-bridge from the Lake Baykal region of Asia at the end of the last ice age, 11,500 years ago, is definitely due for some revision. A 13,000-year-old skeleton on the wind-swept island of Santa Rosa, California (obviously a kayaker); camp sites in southern Peru and southern Chile over 12,000 years old; artifacts in caves that may be as much as 30,000 years old; a rock shelter in Pennsylvania which seems to have been occupied by humans 17,000 years ago; the 11,500 year old fossil remains of a young woman in Brazil; all these point to flaws in the hitherto standard theory. While linguistic, genetic, and dental anthropological evidence all points to the population of America from Asia in three distinct waves of immigration, it remains to be discovered whether the first of these was entering an empty land, and if not, where the former human inhabitants came from. We are in for some surprises I suspect. There is a distinct possibility that mitochondrial DNA research now underway will show that the small, but very significant, genetic differences between First Nations and present-day Northeast Asians was due to the assimilation of ancient American populations, some of whom may be closely related to those of prehistoric Europe.

Like I say, we all came from somewhere else, but that need not be disturbing. We settle down and become part of the land. And, if you think about it, even Vancouver Island is the same—a piece of lapideous scum that has drifted here and there for more than two hundred million years on the deeper ocean that lies a hundred kilometres beneath our feet. Like many of us and our ancestors, this land was once itself thousands of miles away from North America—but that's another story.

Reference:

[Models of migration to the New World](#)

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