Audio: Minik and the Meteorite - Transcript

Kimberly Cartier: Have you ever thought about where the items displayed in museum exhibits come from? Hi, I'm Kimberly Cartier. While talking with some of the scientists who created the GeoContext teaching modules, Dr. Christine Chen told me about the complicated ties between one of the world's most famous meteorites and the tragic story of a boy named Minik.

Christine Chen: My GeoContext module was about meteorites and museum legacies. And I made that slide deck with the intention of trying to start a discussion on sample collection, which is an activity that many geologists, including myself, take part in. In my discipline, collecting samples is pretty much fundamental to the way we do science: if you don't have rocks, you simply don't have data. So, my slides focused on one particular meteorite, the Ahnighito Meteorite in the American Museum of Natural History, which is the largest meteorite on display in the world. This meteorite originally made landfall in Greenland and was, quoting from the museum's website, "discovered," (in scare quotes) by Robert Peary in 1894. I say "discovered" facetiously because, obviously, Peary was not the first human by any means to have come across that space rock. The meteorite was actually a very important iron source for the Inuit in Greenland at the time —and in fact, it was the only local iron source in that particular environment aside from what they could get through trade. But despite that fact—that this meteorite was rare and of great importance to the Intuit—without really asking for permission, Peary took three of the largest blocks from this meteorite and shipped them all to New York. The only thing the Inuit received in return were some rifles, pots and pans, which Peary used to pay a few individuals for doing the physical labor of moving the meteorites onto his ship.

But not only that, not only did Peary take meteorites but he also took six Inuit individuals on his ship back to New York because, well, one of the anthropologists at the American Museum of Natural History just asked him to. And one of the individuals that Peary brought to New York was this young seven-year-old boy named Minik. Minik's story is one that is haunting. Basically, in less than a year of him and the others arriving in New York, most fell ill and died, including his father. And so Minik ended up being adopted by a New York family and grew up having to assimilate. And when Minik was 18, devastatingly, he found out from a newspaper report that museum staff had lied to him about his father's burial. The museum had faked his father's funeral service, burying a log wrapped in a shroud so that they could instead use his father's body for scientific dissection, where his bones are preserved now in the museum's collections. And when Minik found out, obviously he was outraged, like anyone would be. And for years, he tried to get his father's bones back but was unsuccessful.

His story, unfortunately, continues to be one of tragedy. At age 20, Minik goes back to Greenland but finds that he's forgotten much of the language and other basic survival skills that many of the other young men of his age knew. Eventually he does relearn and even remaster these skills, which is amazing, and he becomes a guide for other Americans coming into the area for so-called exploration. But Minik, in this role, he's in-between two worlds, an outsider to both his original home and the new one that he didn't choose. Eventually he makes his way back to America, but then dies at the young age of 29 from the Spanish flu of the 1918 pandemic.

What I hope other people who are engaging with this material think about and question is the nature of sample collection: what it means, how it's done, what it's for, and for whom is it all for. Lately, I've been thinking about the act of displaying things in museums. Indiana Jones, although a fictional character, was very influential to me as a youth and did all these fun things that I wanted to do. And as I've been grappling with Minik's story, I've kept thinking about Indiana Jones's famous line where he says, "It belongs in a museum!" And now I feel very silly for having repeated that line so many times as a kid, because now I'm thinking, "Does it though? I don't necessarily think that's the case."

I don't have the answers to questions like, Should museums exist? Or, What is the value of displaying things? Or, Who owns a sample that is collected? I ask myself, "Who is it all for? And at whose expense?" I don't know the answer to those questions, but I really hope that these slides at least start a discussion, for not only future geoscientists, but maybe also people like me, people like me who are trying to reconcile these dark legacies of the scientific fields we work in and wanting to do good. Isn't that what science should be?