Full Citation Details:
The 1975 Symposium at ANZAAS was for me the first I have attended and heard Aboriginal people, my people, speak their views so strongly about archaeology in public. It has been and still is the feeling amongst my people that archaeologists are a bloody nuisance only good for sticking their noses and tools where they are not wanted "just like most white men", and I have thought along those same lines myself in the past. This attitude has stemmed from the lack of understanding on both sides of the fence, although archaeologists have not really given Aboriginal people any cause to think otherwise. It could be termed a "communication barrier", and as it has only really been the archaeologist in the past who was interested or involved in this field of science, it is I feel up to them to establish an understanding and a respect between those concerned.

It has in the past been the practice of museums, universities, and various other establishments concerned with the sciences of the Aboriginal race "to just do their own thing" with Aboriginal relics, sacred or otherwise. The Aboriginal people were never questioned as to what they thought; they were a nonentity, and this to Aboriginal people is just bad manners and ignorance on the part of white people. Also because of what has happened in the past the stigma surrounding grave diggers and desecrators (which is how Aboriginal people term archaeologists) still exists, but is only through your own ignorance of the feelings of the Aboriginal people.

Because of the attitudes shown by the Aboriginal people who attended ANZAAS 75, you must realize that Aboriginal people are concerned and also have definite ideas about your work. You must first contact the Aboriginal people concerned not just the government or other bodies; Aboriginal people should be involved in archaeology, and any findings should remain the property of the Aboriginal people, and there should be museums run by Aboriginal people. There are of course sacred objects that white men will never be able or allowed to touch, and you will have to respect our feelings or beliefs regarding this if you wish to gain our confidence. I realize just how important some of your discoveries are to the benefit of mankind. I am just as interested in knowing about the age and past habits of my people, but not to the point where it interferes with our tribal laws and customs that were laid down by my ancestors thousands of years ago.

Our culture and our myths are beautiful and something that the white society have never had amongst them. You have got to understand and appreciate this fact and look at our point of view. Aborigines have for too long been treated as nonentities in their own land by white society, and have up to now not really had a democratic say in their own affairs. It has taken Europeans 200 years to create the stigma that Aboriginal people have concerning white men, and it will take a long time for that stigma to disappear, and the communication barrier to be broken. Aboriginal people are human beings not unintelligent idiots. You must involve us or I should say confide in us in matters relating to our affairs. The communication barrier will begin to fall only when you can prove to us that you respect our beliefs, customs, and traditions. It is up to you.

Ms Sandra Onus,
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