

THE VALUE AND DIVERSITY OF INDIGENOUS ARCHAEOLOGY: A RESPONSE TO MCGHEE

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Robert McGhee (2008) recently argued against the validity and viability of Indigenous archaeology based on claims that untenable "Aboriginalism" supports the entire enterprise. However, he mischaracterizes and simplifies Indigenous archaeology, despite the wealth of literature suggesting that such community approaches have had and will continue to have great value for method, theory, rigorous interpretation, and political value in archaeology.

Robert McGhee (2008) se ha manifestado recientemente en contra de la validez y viabilidad de la arqueología indígena alegando que el "aboriginalismo" inalcanzable sostiene toda la empresa. Sin embargo, él malinterpreta y simplifica la arqueología indígena a pesar de que la vasta literatura sobre el tema señala el gran valor que dicho acercamiento comunitario ha tenido y continua teniendo para el método, la teoría, la interpretación rigurosa y la importancia política de la arqueología.

New kinds of archaeologies should undergo careful evaluation as they mature and exert influence in the discipline, and the appearance of Indigenous archaeology over the last 10 years should not be exempt. Evaluation involves taking stock of the field and suggesting new directions for future growth, and it also involves critique and recommendations for rethinking. Both should be welcomed when they make a substantive and informed contribution. Unfortunately, McGhee's (2008) article makes neither a sufficiently informed nor a substantive contribution, opting instead to mischaracterize the burgeoning field of Indigenous archaeology. In the brief space permitted for a response, I focus on three problems that fundamentally undermine his critique: insufficient sampling of the relevant literature, caricature of Indigenous archaeology, and questionable treatment of colonialism and notions of "Aboriginalism."

Perhaps most troubling from an academic position is the poor representation of Indigenous archaeology literature in McGhee's review. To develop an acceptable critique of a body of work, one must demonstrate a satisfactory grasp of the range and

depth of the literature. Other than initial references in the first paragraph, McGhee instead focuses his attack on the work of Watkins (2000, 2003), Zimmerman (2006), and Nicholas (Nicholas and Andrews 1997) and even then with very selective sampling of their numerous publications. Although these three individuals have led Indigenous archaeology for quite some time, they do not represent all voices or projects. Where is *Indigenous Archaeologies* (Smith and Wobst 2005), or the special issue of *American Indian Quarterly* dedicated to decolonizing archaeology (Atalay 2006), or the chapters in *Collaboration in Archaeological Practice* (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2007), *Cross-Cultural Collaboration* (Kerber 2006), and *Indigenous People and Archaeology* (Peck et al. 2006)?

A deeper assessment of the literature would reveal the errors in his claims that "predicting the benefits of Indigenous archaeology is a theoretical exercise, because the thorough revision of the discipline envisaged by its advocates has yet to be implemented" (McGhee 2008:592) and that "[d]ifficulties arise, however, when archaeologists accede to claims of Aboriginal exceptionalism and incorporate such assumptions into archaeological

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practice” (McGhee 2008:580). The recently published *Collaborating at the Trowel's Edge* (Silliman, ed. 2008), as well as every volume cited above or numerous other cases (e.g., Dowdall and Parrish 2002), reveal just how workable and numerous Indigenous archaeology projects are without the dangers of exceptionalism. McGhee (2008:591), himself, recognizes this by citing the influential book by Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthaphonh (2006). All of these publications show that archaeological research projects are not just “focused on mitigating the presumed negative effects of archaeological practice on the living descendants of the communities” instead of “discussing potential contributions to knowledge of the past” (McGhee 2008:579). They do both simultaneously, successfully, and rigorously without “strip[ping] archaeology of the scientific attributes that make it a particularly powerful narrator of the past” (McGhee 2008:591). These joint considerations of both past and present have made these archaeologies better on both fronts.

Contrary to McGhee’s caricature, Indigenous archaeology is not an artifact of the process of rendering Indigenous people in universalized and exceptionalist ways as part of “Aboriginalism.” Instead, Indigenous archaeology developed in reaction to a history of academic appropriation of Indigenous pasts, the need for decolonization, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, the lack of Native people in the ranks of professional archaeology (even though the discipline in North America thrives on the pasts of their ancestors), and Indigenous communities’ desires to protect, manage, and even study their own heritage (Watkins 2000; Silliman, ed. 2008). Although not available at the time of McGhee’s writing, a recent encyclopedia entry distills the richness and diversity of Indigenous archaeology,

defined as any one (or more) of the following: (1) the active participation or consultation of Indigenous peoples in archaeology...; (2) a political statement concerned with issues of Aboriginal self-government, sovereignty, land rights, identity, and heritage; (3) a postcolonial enterprise designed to decolonize the discipline; (4) a manifestation of Indigenous epistemologies; (5) the basis for alternative models of cultural heritage management or stewardship; (6) the product of choices and actions

made by individual archaeologists; (7) a means of empowerment and cultural revitalization or political resistance; and (8) an extension, evaluation, critique, or application of current archaeological theory [Nicholas 2008:1660].

Because McGhee reduces Indigenous archaeology to only one (number four) of Nicholas’ eight components, his critique has only limited usefulness.

It might help to remember that Indigenous archaeology frequently has been defined as archaeology with, for, and by Indigenous people (Nicholas 1997, 2008; Nicholas and Andrews 1997; Smith and Wobst 2005). This prepositional diversity captures a fundamental basis of Indigenous archaeology as *community* archaeology and does not necessarily require—although does respect—potential differences between “Western” and “Indigenous” knowledges. Archaeology *for* Indigenous people ensures that research projects attend to the troubled history of archaeology’s treatment of Native Americans and First Nations. It attempts to tell useful, respectful, and peopled histories that resonate with communities’ senses of themselves, their pasts and futures, and their particular needs. This need not undermine archaeology’s commitments to studying parts of the past in rigorous and scientific ways, nor must it produce “proprietary histories,” particularly when done collaboratively. Archaeology *with* Indigenous people develops the strong potential for healthy collaboration. It permits Native communities with ties to and ownership of the land (and the history) that archaeologists seek to study some voice in how such work takes place. Such collaboration with Indigenous people easily counters McGhee’s (2008:595) assertion that archaeologists should be “getting to know Indigenous people as individual acquaintances, rather than as contemporary avatars of an ancient ideal.” The foundations of this kind of community-based archaeology already hinge powerfully on those interpersonal connections; otherwise, Indigenous archaeology projects would end before they even started (see chapters in Kerber 2006; Silliman, ed. 2008). Finally, archaeology *by* Native people assures that the discipline achieves some much needed diversity. Archaeology by Indigenous people also encourages full participation, supports educational and career paths, recognizes sovereignty, foregrounds community, and makes a *critical* space for their knowledges and concerns about history.

By arguing that essentialism, Aboriginalism, and primitivism ground Indigenous archaeology, McGhee loses sight of the fact that this branch deals more with the opposites of those: postcoloniality, respectful dialogue between various stakeholders of which archaeologists are only one, and activist, multivocal histories. As a result, his argument reads more like a rear-guard action. For instance, McGhee worries about the universalization of Indigenous people, but then universalizes all of human history to diminish European colonialism: “the accumulated evidence of history demonstrates that all of our ancestors have at some point lost their homelands, taken over the homeland of others, mixed with other societies and changed beyond recognition over time” (McGhee 2008:583). In addition, McGhee also claims that “scholarly organizations, law, mass media, and government ... and scholarly etiquette” strive to avoid annoying Indigenous people (McGhee 2008:582) and that “universities, granting agencies, academic societies, museums, and other institutions still have an almost irrational fear of offending Indigenous groups” (McGhee 2008:594). Yet, many cases suggest the opposite: McGill University Chancellor Richard Pounds recently stated that “Canada was a land of savages” before Europeans colonized it (Barrera 2008); U.S. soldiers use the term “Indian Country” to describe dangerous areas of military conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan (Silliman 2008); Native American scholars worry about racism and intellectual gatekeeping (Grande 2000); and professional, college, and high school sports teams actively fight to retain Native American mascots.

McGhee’s position works against the postcolonial aims supported by most indigenous archaeologists who seek to interrogate, repair, and hopefully move beyond the colonial origins of the discipline and its treatment of Native people. McGhee’s attempts to de-universalize Indigenous experiences, which should be welcomed, and to re-universalize (and elide) colonialism, which should be countered, miss the point that what many Indigenous people around the world do share or have shared is a colonial experience. He claims: “The official recognition by national governments, as well as by the United Nations and other international organizations, of Indigenous people as societies with common attributes, common problems, and common rights, appears to have rescued this long-discredited

concept from the anthropological rubbish heap” (McGhee 2008:584). McGhee correctly notes that Indigenous people may not have many cultural attributes in common; however, they do share some commonalities in their histories, struggles, and rights in the cauldrons of colonialism. This recognition does not essentialize or universalize worldviews, cultural practices, or histories, but rather encourages a contextual understanding of those within a political and historical reality that needs attention in the contemporary world. Indigenous archaeology—and the communities it represents, supports, historicizes, intertwines—ignites and exists for those hopes.

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