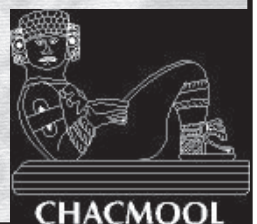


POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE 39TH
(2006) ANNUAL CHACMOOL
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CALGARY, ALBERTA, CANADA**

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BLURRING FOR CLARITY: ARCHAEOLOGY AS HYBRID PRACTICE

Stephen W. Silliman

In an effort to decolonize the field, archaeologists, particularly historical archaeologists, have used post-colonial notions of hybridity to interpret past (and present) colonialism and especially the experiences of indigenous people therein. Archaeologists also have countered the colonialist tendencies of the discipline through repatriation efforts and Indigenous participation. This paper blends these two trends as a way of exploring the possibilities of archaeology as a hybrid practice. I refer in particular to the collaborative and indigenous archaeologies of recent years and the complex ways that identities and practices interface therein. In this complex post-colonial (or neocolonial) world, it is worth considering how archaeological hybridity can serve as a social and political strategy to blur borders, to unsettle method and theory, to acknowledge colonial legacies but not be consumed by them, and to insure that histories created through archaeology remain grounded and relevant.

The decolonization of archaeology appears at an opportune time. Archaeologists regularly confront colonial legacies in the methods, theories, interpretations, representations, and personnel of the discipline, many of which have been made apparent thanks to the activism of Indigenous scholars and community members, public intellectuals, and on-the-ground practitioners of archaeology (e.g., Atalay 2006; Lilley 2000; McNiven and Russell 2003; Peck et al. 2003; Smith and Wobst 2005; Watkins 2000). The task of decolonization is a difficult one as archaeologists navigate the ever-shifting balance of coming to terms with a sordid disciplinary history, striving for a rigorous and useful archaeological practice, and understanding the power of the past in the present. The discipline rests on the latter, really; otherwise archaeologists would not expend so much time and effort reclaiming objects and stories from the past for offering insights today. But non-archaeologists well outside of the discipline understand the power of the past in the present, summoning it as they do in politics, personal memory, cultural history, govern-

ment precedence, and heritage control and ownership.

To decolonize archaeology means to be aware of that broader context since we do not practice archaeology in a vacuum, or at least we should try not to do so, nor should we expect archaeology's contribution to present uses of the past to be neutral or passive. In the United States, for instance, students attend and archaeologists teach at colleges and universities with Native American mascots, parents send out children at Halloween to gather candy as little Indians in stereotyped costumes, and the government sends soldiers to the Middle East to fight in what the military still likes to refer to as "Indian Country" (Silliman 2008). Archaeology continues in the midst of these events and sometimes with people who have participated or been represented in these contexts. As a result, archaeologists need not only be aware of this broader colonial discourse in these supposedly post-colonial times, but also combat it in their teaching, research, and engagements with the public. This should not imply that all archaeologists need to become famous public intellectuals, but should remind us that we need to be part of

that broader dialogue in the public arena about the past.

To decolonize archaeology means, in part, to examine the practices and discourses of the field for the ways that they still resonate with colonialism and, as a result, continue to do work in the world today. This work takes place in offices, laboratories, classrooms, excavation units, museum collections, community interactions, public venues, and the ways that research and information are picked up by others for bringing the past alive for purposes of the present. I argue here that these two realms – practices and discourses – need different decolonizing tactics that must work in tandem: discourses need to be sharpened, and practices need to be blurred. This paper focuses primarily on the latter, but first I would like to discuss briefly some issues pertaining to the former.

SHARPENING LANGUAGE

Archaeology, like all disciplines, transmits its meanings, trainings, interpretations, and many other components through language, both written and oral. This language may assist with standardization, complex topics, student training, collegial dialogue, evaluation criteria, or even dissemination to the public. As a discipline that strives sometimes for science and at least usually for rigor, archaeology must require that its practitioners pay attention to the language that structures and expresses these aspects. The implications of language run quite deeply into our classifications and our ways of knowing the world. We may have permitted significant slippage in these languages and now need to decolonize them through clarification. Otherwise, they continue to do work in the academic community and in the communities with which we work or from which our growing diversity of colleagues, collaborators, and students derive. Though

the concepts may slip in the language of the discipline, they may well slip and fall once they exit our implicit understandings and take on meaning in other communities.

One example concerns the terminology of “colonialism” and “culture contact” that remains common in North American and Australian archaeology to refer to the experiences of Indigenous people during the influx of European colonists and associated settlements. I have argued elsewhere that archaeologists face a terminological problem – which becomes a conceptual problem – when they refer to colonialism as culture contact (Silliman 2005). The reasons are that the latter tends to conjure images of short-term encounters rather than long-term entanglements, to downplay the severity of interaction and the radically different levels of political power, and to privilege predefined cultural traits over creative or new cultural products that may well signal a community changing to remain the same. In this case, the decolonization of language sometimes means the necessary re-appearance of colonialism in the discourse.

The colonial legacies embedded in the use of “contact” are several, but let me offer one quick case here. Telling colleagues, public, and indigenous collaborators about the “Contact Period” elides the real effects of colonialism on those whose experiences we try to render through archaeological and historical research. Contact seems a bit neutral of a term for a reservation community in 18th-century New England, or a 19th-century Spanish mission in California, or the movement of settlers and the U.S. Cavalry to the West Coast of North America as part of Manifest Destiny. When does this “Contact Period” end? I think that is a difficult question to answer, but no one would really think of it as happening recently. However, it is *not* that difficult to see the continuation of colonialism and its legacies in 20th- and 21st-century North America.

The second issue of language is one that Joe Watkins (2006) recently outlined. He discusses the impacts of certain words when we take them for granted in our disciplinary circles and then broadcast them to communities – particularly, Native communities – and assume that they mean the same thing. The best example is the notion of “abandonment” to refer to the Chaco Canyon phenomenon in the American Southwest as though abandonment means the same thing – giving up ownership and connection – to all interlocutors (Watkins 2006). This situation does not imply that the word “abandon” is always already colonial, but its use in this case does tend to colonize the historical and cultural connections that some Native communities, such as Hopi, feel toward Chaco Canyon. The power to name, even when only a word as seemingly innocuous as “abandon”, can do significant work in the present.

The issue is not about being politically correct or about mere “semantics” (the common, “you know what I meant” position), but about decolonizing the discipline. Such acts will not only help sharpen the way that we think, but will sharpen the way that we communicate critical concepts to descendent communities and the public. It will also help to tailor a language that welcomes different kinds of archaeologists, such as the growing trend of having Native Americans themselves as archaeological colleagues and students. One way to do this unpacking is to encourage multivocality. Most people involved in the decolonization project find this a worthwhile goal, not only for community involvement but also for sharpening our insights on the past (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006). How much “culture contact” and “abandonment” would we be talking about if more Native Americans and First Nations people were archaeologists? Although one might argue that many voices might produce cacophony, which would un-

dermine any hopes of sharpening and clarity in our languages, I disagree. Multiple voices help accentuate the edges of our discourse, taking note of what it leaves out and what it emphasizes. The only blurring happens in the realms of authority and power, and this is frequently what decolonization is all about. Blurring does not mean we get fuzzy and imprecise but rather that we dissolve borders and recognize ambiguity. Stated differently, we must unpack our baggage if we have any hopes of staying around for awhile.

BLURRING PRACTICES

To complement the sharpening of language in a decolonizing project, we must do quite the opposite with our practices. We must blur them. Archaeologists are familiar with some ways already that produce blurriness, such as certain consumption practices at archaeology conferences and on field projects, but here I mean something more grounded in a postcolonial idea of hybridity, such as that proffered by Bhabha (1985). Blurring of practices happens when archaeology intentionally hybridizes to make its boundaries more permeable, its methods more negotiable, and its practices more explicitly cultural rather than only empirical. This turns our attention to what we *do* as archaeologists and the effects of that doing on the world.

Our identity as archaeologists seems already defined by what we do. Even though archaeological study subjects might include history, culture, gender, material culture, evolution, or any number of things, we do not have exclusive purview over those vis-à-vis other disciplines. To many, we are archaeologists because we dig up old things or at least like studying those that someone else already has. This pulls archaeologists much more quickly from the past to the present than perhaps archives do for historians, but archaeologists often do not take a critical,

self-reflexive look at methods and methodologies (Archer and Bartoy 2006; Hodder 2005). As a result, many presume that decolonization involves only a theoretical enterprise. Yet, within these methods lie real-world effects and subtleties that frequently go undiscussed and that, in fact, have theoretical origins and implications. Maybe someday archaeologists will not be identified by the actions they perform, but while they are, this gives us ample opportunity to make what we do different and meaningful. This is the trowel's edge (Berggren and Hodder 2003; Silliman 2008).

The metaphor of a hybrid may prove useful for decolonizing archaeology because of its pre-existing usefulness as a key concept in post-colonial approaches. Hybridization has allowed us to understand the ways that colonized people, frequently indigenous, have found creative ways to blend practices to produce or retain community, personal, and cultural identities. In other words, rather than expecting stereotypical or rigidly "authentic" identities, we have been able to see novel mergers and renegotiations so that people might change to remain who they are. We have seen individuals not acculturating, but intersecting with changing material realities to survive and to make themselves anew. To apply this to archaeology as a disciplinary practice rather than only to the subjects of its study seems like a worthwhile effort, in part because it is a creative process of moving forward, in part because it works well with a focus on practices, and in part because it takes the presumed response of the colonized – to hybridize – and intentionally applies it to the discipline thought to retain colonialist biases.

Lynn Meskell (2005) has discussed hybrid archaeology with her work in Africa, emphasizing the ways that it can become more like archaeological ethnography in its engagement with contemporary communi-

ties and politics. Similarly, Charlotte Damm (2005) has outlined a kind of hybrid archaeology that has participants navigating the complex identity worlds of being Indigenous and being a scientific researcher. Both of these hold significant promise for a decolonizing archaeology, but I want to expand these discussions in a slightly different direction, choosing to emphasize not as much the multidisciplinary nature of a hybrid archaeology or the hybrid identities of its practitioners, but rather the potential power of its hybrid practices.

One component of this hybridity in practice concerns the opening of disciplinary borders, the renegotiation of what it means to do archaeology, and the expansion of participants therein, whether as archaeologists themselves or as collaborators. Do I mean that archaeology should become more multidisciplinary? Couldn't this accomplish the same outcome as hybridity by having more data sets, more participation, and more collaboration? Sure, but is this *decolonization*? For instance, are we ever really multidisciplinary when we collaborate with descendent communities? How often do archaeologists consider Indigenous knowledge or practices worthy of the same attention as the information that we obtain from other academic disciplines, like geology or chemistry? I do not imply by this that all knowledges are equally useful at all times because usefulness depends on the questions asked and the outcomes sought. Rather, my point is that the involvement of Indigenous descendent communities promotes more of a fundamental change in archaeology – a hybridization in cultural realms – than simply adding other ancillary academic disciplines.

The way to make archaeology more of a hybrid is not by necessarily (or at least first) changing the identities of the participants. We certainly need more *kinds* of identities that would come from strengthened ethnic and cultural diversity in the field of archae-

ology and perhaps even need *expanded* identities, as Jack Rossen (2006, 2007) has argued recently for archaeologists who find their role as archaeologists being subsumed within roles of advocate and community worker in Indigenous communities. However, we need not expect all participants (that is, the identities) to hybridize to change the final product. That is, we do not necessarily need archaeologists, especially those of European descent, to become “more Native” nor do we need Indigenous people to become “more academic” or more “Western”. At times, these proposed identity shifts may be antithetical to one another and may result in superficiality. Instead, the way to make archaeology a hybrid, and a powerful one at that, is to hybridize its *practices*. Let the practices change to reflect the multiple, intersecting, and perhaps contradictory identities that perform them. Find a way to “do” archaeology that welcomes multiple participants and communities, and let people’s already hybrid identities engage or transform through practice ... if the context permits or encourages it.

Proposing archaeology as hybrid practice allows us to negotiate the identity politics that infuse the discipline. We do not want to enter a situation where people can only study their own pasts, such as only Navajos studying Navajo history, only Turks studying Çatalhöyük, or only Welsh studying megaliths and castles in Wales. Yet, we must continue decolonizing archaeology so that people have the opportunity and the voice to speak out about their own histories, if and when they desire it, to prevent its monopolization and appropriation by “outsiders.” Furthermore, we can no longer talk about the divide or collaboration, depending on the situation, between solely Native Americans and archaeologists because these do not bound always-distinct groups due to the burgeoning numbers of Native Americans who are themselves archaeologists.

But to return to the question of hybridity and its intersection with identity, are these Native American archaeologists some kind of cultural hybrid, a shifting identity to accommodate the continued presence of a potential colonizing force? I am not sure that they are. Certainly, the identity of being an archaeologist has now been adopted by some Indigenous people, but I do not see that it has fundamentally altered their conceptions of themselves, although it may cause tension in their own communities. As Davina Two Bears (2006) has argued, to be a Navajo archaeologist is *not* an oxymoron. Caring for the past and for heritage makes sense as a cultural practice in Navajo life, and archaeology can be used as a tool for this project. People will have to be able to do archaeology without having this “doing” colonize their consciousness or bodies; it will have to involve a hybrid practice. This is not to say that doing archaeology and learning about the past through this vehicle might not actually change the way people see the world or perhaps even their identities, but it may very well serve to reinforce and solidify identities, histories, and belonging.

Another reason that I hesitate to call Native American archaeologists cultural hybrids is because we would likely not call hybrids those non-Native archaeologists who have accommodated or adopted some Indigenous perspectives. We are still haunted by the ghosts of colonialism and acculturation studies with the notion that only “the natives” can change. Admitting colonizer hybridity is tantamount to disassembling realities and questioning authority; it is dangerous for many who guard the scientific tenets of the field. If we could think of everyone as hybrids who are variously negotiating the terrain of a decolonizing archaeology, then such a characterization might work, but I have a gut feeling that this decolonizing idea would, in fact, try to recolo-

nize Indigenous people within archaeology's boundaries of itself. Similarly, it might dilute the power of hybridization as a process if we then termed everyone a hybrid.

The realm of "indigenous archaeology" offers an interesting case of this kind of hybridization. Like many who support what has become known as "indigenous archaeology," I do not see this as a kind of archaeology that should be practiced only by Indigenous people (Atalay 2006), but as a way of *doing* archaeology that is not just by, but also with and for, Indigenous people (Nicholas 2007, 1997). One of the hallmarks of indigenous archaeology as it has developed in North America and Australia is its collaborative nature (Kerber 2006; Silliman 2008; Smith and Jackson 2007). Collaboration can promote hybrid practices because it does not require that people give up their identities. It only requires that collaborators respect their similarities and differences, understand their histories, share authority, expect dissonance, hope for harmony, and make space for multivocality. These are hybrid practices, sometimes reconciliatory, sometimes challenging. As Smith and Jackson (2006:312) have recently noted: "The decolonization of Indigenous archaeology is a considerable task, and it is a task that must be shared by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This is not a task that Indigenous people should be asked to undertake alone." Similarly, Sonya Atalay (2006:301) "advocate[s] for a collaborative approach that blends the strengths of Western archaeological science with the knowledge and epistemologies of Indigenous peoples to create a set of theories and practices for an ethically informed study of the past, history, and heritage." Not that all collaborations must involve multiple parties working together, but collaboration should involve hybridization of multiple practices and ways of knowing, a process that may well take place *inside* one individual.

The case offered by a Jewish archaeologist working in Israel, Sandra Scham, and a Palestinian archaeologist, Adel Yahya, might offer a way forward as their ideas intersect with some dimensions of indigenous archaeology. They argue:

In order to communicate our efforts to our respective communities we needed to achieve some degree of understanding of the other side without giving up our own history and sense of ourselves. ... While we may crave certainty in our understanding we are, nonetheless, aware that we have partially rejected the certainty of our distinct cultural institutions simply be [sic] working together. (Scham and Yahya 2003:402).

This approach may capture what it means to hybridize in practice without necessarily compromising or challenging the identities brought into the mix. In an area as rife with conflict and neocolonialism as Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, such hybrids are difficult but necessary. One could hope that these personal dialogues, often in project-specific contexts, might then lead to greater transformation in state-level policies and disciplinary practices.

The fundamental reason for hybridity is that archaeological methods have effects in the world far outside of those related to our academic, avocational, or cultural resource management work. As archaeologists, we make excavation or survey decisions based on research designs, empirical needs, data limitations, or best practices to insure efficiency in labor and resources. We treat these methodological questions as though they relate only to our research agendas, as

though these methods are *only* empirical. Yet, descendent communities have been trying for years to remind archaeologists that these methods are also cultural and social, not only in their origins and contexts, but also in the work they do in the world. Depending on who is concerned, this world may be the physical world, the cultural world, or the supernatural world, and this work may be harmful, disruptive, appropriating, and colonizing. Greg Denning's (2004:46) words from *Beach Crossings* ring true here:

Archaeology is a political sort of science. Digging up the past is different from writing and reading the past. In archaeology, something is always disturbed – someone's land, someone's bones, someone's property, someone's rights. ... So archaeology can never turn in on itself. It can never close its eyes and protest the purity of its ideals without acknowledging how that purity affects others.

In the age of (or beyond) the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), archaeologists have been made increasingly aware of the effects of methods, not only of retrieval but also of curation, have had on Native American communities. Uncovering, removing, and disturbing human remains have had extraordinary effects on Indigenous people, who have seen it as yet one more colonizing effort by settler communities and their academic hobbyists and as potentially dangerous and disruptive in the spiritual world. Archaeologists have been seen as building careers on Native bodies and, in the litigation surrounding the famous Kennewick Man case, *against* Native

bodies, past and present (Watkins 2004). Indigenous people are not alone in this perception of archaeology's dirty work. Even in Israel, where archaeology was once mobilized to ground the Jewish state in the land of Palestine and to gird nationalist and colonialist discourses (El-Haj 2003), the 1990s saw the rise of a powerful Ultra-Orthodoxy sector in the religious Jewish community that demanded the reburial of all human remains, Jewish or not, that had been desecrated through excavation (Hallotte and Joffe 2002:88-94).

The struggles over the repatriation of human remains have served as a catalyst for many changes in archaeology, but it only tipped the iceberg of concerns about archaeology's methods. Rather than continue to guard disciplinary borders from non-academics or Indigenous people, some archaeologists have sought ways to hybridize their methods in ways that both reconcile and respect inherent tensions. Tara Million's (2005) excavations in circular units as an indigenous ceremonial act offer a perfect example from Canada. Archaeologists tend to excavate in squares to have systematic, contiguous, easily calculable and expandable excavation units, but other concessions may need to be made in local and cultural contexts. Archaeologists working at Kashaya Pomo sites near the Russian colony of Ross in 19th-century California have also found ways to have students and staff abide by Native American cultural proscriptions regarding menstrual cycles. According to *k^hela* rules, women were not allowed to work on the site when they are menstruating out of concerns that they had too much power and might cause harm to themselves or others (Dowdall and Parrish 2002). This is a hybrid archaeology. One cannot simply show up to work or to field school without engaging immediately in someone else's cultural world. Observing *k^hela* rules did not necessarily make female students in the

field class change their identities nor did it offer an easy or comfortable solution if misinterpreted as patriarchal or sexist, but it produced a different kind of archaeological and cultural practice.

My own work with the Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation in southeastern Connecticut has involved many discussions about and adjustments to archaeological methods to meet the Native community's cultural needs (Silliman and Sebastian Dring 2008). For instance, the Eastern Pequot had concerns about archaeologists entering the reservation and disrupting the land without being ritually smudged first. In addition, rather than do a standard dig-fill-and-move-on shovel test pit survey, an Eastern Pequot tribal member working with us places a tobacco offering in every single unit, which are quite numerous now over five years of work. Also, the laboratory work has transformed in its hybridity. Rather than discard in the laboratory all of the "junk" mistakenly collect in the field, we return it all to the reservation as part of their land. Not even hardcore scientific archaeologists could question the accommodations as undermining a rigorous research agenda, but these efforts went a long way toward designing an archaeological "way of being" that met multiple cultural needs.

CONCLUSION

Archaeologists must attend to making the discipline a series of ever-expanding hybrid practices and sharpened languages if we seek decolonization. We must recognize our research methods as cultural activities and our words as powerful tools. We must scrutinize the inscrutable – our methodologies and mundane methods – as though they carry as much real-world impact as our theories. What do public visitors, community leaders, or Indigenous people remember when they saw an archaeologist excavate a

human burial? The post-processual, feminist, neomarxist spin that the excavator put on the mortuary ritual, or the way that the excavator dug it and treated it? Most would agree it is the latter. The most salient memory may hinge on the fact that they excavated it at all.

Perhaps we should take some inspiration from hybrid cars that now dot our continent's roadways. Certainly, they are not icons of decolonization, but what might the metaphor offer? First, these vehicles may have looked a little strange at first, but they have moved now to fit firmly within our conceptions of what a car (=archaeology) might look like. Second, by trying to reduce gas consumption, these hybrid cars have offered a burgeoning critique of oil dependence, which has contributed to significant violence and neocolonialism in the Middle East, without having people yet give up their identities grounded in automobile travel. Third, the hybrid vehicles have demonstrated that when we mix concepts – gas and electricity, or by extension, Western scientific archaeology and Indigenous knowledge and community concerns – we have the potential to go much, much further on the resources at hand.

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