

Decolonising Native American Archaeology

It is essential to decolonise archaeology by integrating Native American people into the discipline and the scientific practices carried out therewithin. This essay will explore the role of Native American people and their ability to participate in the protection and preservation of lands and the material culture forcibly taken from them through colonial processes. In order to overcome some of the issues within the discipline, scholars offer suggestions on practices that can be implemented in order to decolonise archaeology. By addressing current policies, issues underlying them, and offering potential solutions, the aim of this essay is to highlight the positive impact that decolonising archaeology could have upon Native American communities.

There are many policies and laws in place that impact upon Native American people both with regard to archaeology, and wider lived experiences. This essay will primarily engage with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), as well as scholarly perspectives on the processes and limits of decolonising archaeology, and the way in which this can be done through practising Indigenous Archaeology.¹ The essay aims to show that ethical engagement with Native American tribes, formal institutions, and those working within these systems, can guide the discipline in a positive direction. Furthermore, actively working to decolonise archaeology is a vital tool in challenging and toppling harmful hierarchies and value systems that continue to underpin society due to the lasting legacy of colonialism.

¹ For the purposes of this essay, interpretations of Indigenous archaeology solely apply to Native American communities. Any issues raised and solutions offered with regard to this do not necessarily reflect the perspectives and wishes of all Indigenous communities.

Archaeology is the product of, and continues to exist within, established colonial structures, and the Western desire to claim ownership of lands, people, their material culture, and the way in which their identity is constructed, amongst other things. The idea of ownership underpins the collection, recording, display, and scholarship of material culture. Institutions perpetuate false notions that the white western oppressor is somehow ‘saving’ marginalised communities through continuing to possess stolen property. The introduction of NAGPRA in 1990 does, on a surface level, suggest that formal institutions are conscious of their role in unethical ownership of cultural property, and wish to begin to pay reparations through repatriating material culture.

The implementation of NAGPRA intended to address, and begin to work around, the treatment of ‘Native American sacred objects, objects of cultural patrimony, graves, ancestral remains and items associated with burials’ in the wake of initial colonial endeavours.² NAGPRA requires federally funded institutions to work alongside Native American tribal representatives to establish cultural affiliation, and then repatriate objects so that they may be protected, preserved, or otherwise handled in line with the practices of the given tribe. This paper does not have the depth required to fully outline this process, however issues surrounding the practical execution of NAGPRA can be considered.

Whilst NAGPRA acknowledges the role of archaeology in perpetuating problematic colonial narratives, the act continues to uphold these power structures. The sole application to federally funded institutions is indicative of the tendency to privilege private individuals and institutions. Furthermore, by grounding repatriation in the legal system, it operates within a structure built by entitled white men aiming to retain control under the guise of the ‘greater

² Sonya Atalay, Jen Shannon, and John G. Swogger, *Journeys to Complete the Work*, [United States], p. 4.

good'. Although establishing formal ethical and legal guidelines for repatriation can assist those managing such projects, there is a degree of irony in this - the very artefacts now assessed under NAGPRA regulations were not acquired through any ethical or legal means. Descendent communities, who are well within their rights in requesting the return of their cultural property, are now beholden to legal systems that continue to privilege a western educational model and the perspective of the archaeologist over the Native American voices and knowledge systems they claim to consider of equal weight.

As acts, policies, and laws are the product of systems that intend to prioritise the goals of the ruling class, a reliance on these things by archaeologists means that the discipline will fail to properly meet and respond to the needs and desires of Native American people. Archaeologists should, then, practise their practical and academic work by actively engaging with processes involved in decolonising archaeology. Archaeology is inherently colonial as it is reliant on adhering to the scientific method, which favours provable, replicable evidence, drawing solid conclusions, and practising reliable methodology. This does not account for any cultural variance in constructing and understanding the respective pasts of communities. Nevertheless, this model is considered the ideal standard of archaeological practice, which is, in itself, an elitist practice that demands a formal education. As such, 'research is most often conducted by those outside the group being studied, meaning that the cultural heritage and history of most Native nations is now written and interpreted by those who are "others".'³

Until serious educational reforms are implemented, thus making education and academia more broadly accessible and inclusive, it is vital that those working within such frameworks use their privileged positions to promote change. With regard to decolonising archaeology,

³ Sonya Atalay, 'Indigenous Archaeology as Decolonising Practice', in *American Indian Quarterly*, volume 30, issue 3/4, p. 282.

scholarship must acknowledge and deconstruct Western dominated perspectives and practices, and instead work to communicate Native American perspectives, elevating these voices rather than speaking for them.⁴ Alex Fitzpatrick stresses the need for decolonising all fields within archaeology as interpreting archaeological spaces and artefacts under a new, more fully informed lens that incorporates Native American knowledge will allow for a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of how tribes use resources throughout time.⁵ Regardless of the archaeologist's intent, subtle traces of supremacy and domination, alongside cultural biases, seep into good archaeology, and consciously confronting such issues and engaging in the labour of overcoming such issues will benefit both the researcher - by broadening their perspectives and viewpoints - and the Native American communities affected by scholarship.

In order to make archaeology more inclusive, scholars and archaeologists must favour the cultural, spiritual, and community significance and importance of sites and artefacts above the insights that will bring financial and/or career benefits to the individual. Those practising archaeology are indoctrinated into Western practices and approaches, and this informs how their work is carried out and then relayed to wider audiences and communities. These positions are largely at odds with true Native American understandings of the spaces and materials that make the subject of study. Even the language used internally affects interpretations of archaeological materials. Use of terms such as 'artefacts' views material culture through a clinical, detached, scientific lens that fails to acknowledge the way in which materials have enduring cultural relevance and continuing lives to Native American communities. Practising Indigenous Archaeology makes efforts to acknowledge this, and to

⁴ Atalay, 'Indigenous Archaeology', p. 292.

⁵ Alexandra L. Fitzpatrick, 'Beyond Domestication and Subsistence: A Call for Decolonised Zooarchaeology', *Proceedings of Decolonising Science Narratives*, [The Science Museum: London], p. 5.

reframe practices to better account for the living nature of artefacts and spaces. Ultimately, Indigenous Archaeology calls for changing perspectives.⁶

Considering NAGPRA, decolonising archaeology, and Indigenous archaeology highlights how archaeological work is never separated from societies negatively impacted by the very frameworks that the discipline is born from. Currently established relationships between archaeologists and the affected communities being studied are the direct product of oppressive social hierarchies. These structures do not have to continue to dominate, however. In order to create positive change, first within archaeology, and then within associated disciplines, archaeologists have a responsibility to consider how their current work, and the work of their predecessors, have impacted upon Native American people. By practising Indigenous Archaeology and decolonising practices, archaeologists can begin to shift currently accepted scientific and academic practices in order to better integrate communities that are the stakeholders in Native American archaeology. Native American people may have unique knowledge that can shape archaeological projects, and ultimately enhance and enrich the work happening.

The need for decolonising archaeology demonstrates how archaeology exists within a complex social nexus, and stresses the importance of the archaeologist's obligation to consider how their work impacts the public. The social impacts of archaeology, as it is currently, and has historically been practised, only further colonial legacies. This results in a discipline which further oppresses already marginalised people by privileging a scientific agenda over practices that best benefit communities. By implementing Indigenous Archaeology, positive social impacts include fulfilling ethical responsibilities to engage with

⁶ Joe E. Watkins, 'Beyond the Margin: American Indians, First Nations, and Archaeology in North America', in *American Antiquity*, volume 68, issue 2, p. 277.

affected communities when taking on new projects. Further to this, purposeful, compassionate, and open engagement with Native American tribes can strengthen society through providing an opportunity to establish healthy, mutual relationships that are based on understanding and what is morally good, over relationships prioritising educational and/or financial profits.

To conclude, stereotypes about Native American people are, to some degree, based on misinformed scholarship grounded in an incomplete knowledge of the sites and resources being studied. This is not a problem solely impacting Native American communities, but rather a broader network of minority social groups. The continued oppression and harm to marginalised people does not impact them in isolated instances, but continuously in their daily lives. I believe that there are many practices and problems within the education system, and the fields emerging out of it, which require consideration, deconstruction, and suggested solutions. I am hopeful that, while this paper in no way offers an in-depth study of factors affecting Native American people with regard to archaeology, the points raised may, nevertheless, draw attention to the importance of working as a collective to better integrate oppressed people. Whilst every marginalised community demands respect and long overdue compassion and inclusion, drawing attention to matters concerning one community, may, with any luck, create a snowball effect of positive change that will benefit all.

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