

ABORIGINALISM AND THE PROBLEMS OF INDIGENOUS ARCHAEOLOGY

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This paper contends that proponents of various forms of Indigenous Archaeology base their argument on a paradigm of Aboriginal essentialism ("Aboriginalism") that is derived from the long-discarded concept of Primitive Man. The development of Aboriginalism is explored as a mutually reinforcing process between Indigenous and Western scholars, based on evidence that is at best anecdotal. The adoption of this flawed concept by archaeologists, Western publics, and Indigenous people themselves has led to problematic assumptions that have negative consequences for both the practice of archaeology and for the lives of those who identify themselves as Indigenous. Archaeologists can usefully challenge the historical assumptions on which the paradigm of Aboriginalism is based: the belief that local societies have endured as stable entities over great periods of time, and the consequent projection of contemporary ethnic identities into the deep past. Such a challenge confronts a significant element of the intellectual climate that allows marginalized groups to exist as permanent aliens in the societies of settler nations.

Este trabajo sostiene que los proponentes de diferentes formas de "arqueología indígena" basan sus argumentos en un paradigma de esencialismo aborígen ("aboriginalismo") que se desprende del concepto, desterrado hace tiempo, del hombre primitivo. El desarrollo del aboriginalismo se examina desde la perspectiva de un proceso mutuamente complementario entre los especialistas indígenas y occidentales, basado en la evidencia que es, a lo sumo, anecdótica. La aceptación de este concepto viciado por parte de los arqueólogos, el público y la propia población indígena, ha llevado al establecimiento de hipótesis problemáticas que influyen de forma negativa tanto en la práctica de la arqueología como en la vida de los que se identifiquen como indígenas. Los arqueólogos pueden cuestionar con eficacia las hipótesis históricas en las que se fundamenta el paradigma del aboriginalismo: la presunción de que las sociedades locales han sido históricamente estables y perdurables durante largos períodos de tiempo, y la proyección de las identidades étnicas actuales en el pasado. Para ello, abordaremos un elemento importante del clima intelectual que permite a las sociedades marginadas seguir existiendo como extranjeros permanentes en las sociedades de las naciones coloniales.

The past two decades have seen a significant amount of academic energy invested in professing the urgent need for developing an Indigenous archaeology in North America, and indeed throughout the world. Books, essays, and academic conferences have discussed, defined, and designed a multiplicity of paths toward this goal (cf. articles and references cited in Conkey 2005; Dongoske et al. 2000; McNiven and Russell 2005; Nicholas and Andrews 1997a; Peck et al. 2003; Smith 2004; and Watkins 2000, 2005). Very little effort has been expended, however, in examining the intellectual viability or the social and cultural desirability of this project.

The current paper developed from an endeavor to explore the extent to which the disciplines of

anthropology and archaeology are implicated in constructing a concept that might be conveniently named "Aboriginalism." The word has some currency in Australia, but with variable meanings referring either to support for Aboriginal rights, or to beliefs related to the relationship of contemporary Aboriginals to "authentic" aboriginality (Attwood 1992). The term will be used here in a broader sense, based on the model of Said's (1978) "Orientalism" and referring to the concept that Indigenous societies and cultures possess qualities that are fundamentally different from those of non-Aboriginal peoples. This notion has wide currency in European and North American academic and public thought, although it bears little resemblance to any reality outside the world of scholars and the

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politicians who appropriate academic theories. The idea of “Indigenous archaeology” is very much an artifact of this process, and archaeologists’ acceptance or promotion of a distinct form of their discipline that is appropriate to the study of Aboriginal history implicates the discipline in the production and maintenance of the dubious discourse on Aboriginalism. It also links archaeologists to the potentially negative impact that this discourse may have on the contemporary and future well-being of Indigenous communities in North America and elsewhere.

In dealing with a subject that is fraught with misunderstandings and emotional associations, a writer is well advised to begin by summarizing his personal viewpoint. My perspective differs little from that espoused by Wylie (2005:63), who describes it as “modest realism” and “moderate pragmatic objectivism.” As a secular humanist, my training and experience supports a rationalist scientific approach to the investigation of the world and its past. I view archaeology as a set of techniques developed for the recovery of information related to human history, and as a project that is equally applicable to the history of all human communities. I also see the discipline of archaeology as a means of maintaining candor, integrity, and an approach to objectivity in the work of its members through established methods of peer judgment in accord with a set of transnational standards. Although agreeing that the construction of historical narratives is necessarily influenced by the cultural assumptions and personal situation of the narrator, I argue that a reasonably objective view of the past is attainable by historians who are conscious of bias arising from their individual ideologies and life situations, as well as of alternative views held by others both within and beyond the academy. I recognize archaeology as one among several means of talking about the past. Religious discourse, family and community history that may be either oral or written, and fictional narrative are other important means of dealing with and using the past. The past is a universe that is open to all, and if archaeologists choose not to base their interpretations on the evidence of oral tradition, religious faith, or the imaginative use of other forms of information, they should have no part in denying others the right to do so. I argue that such alternate methods must, however, be of only peripheral interest

to archaeology lest their uncritical acceptance compromise the attributes of the discipline that make it a particularly effective means of talking about the past.

Over several decades, I have enjoyed the acquaintance of many Indigenous individuals—mainly Canadian First Peoples and Inuit—in a variety of circumstances ranging from dogsled trips and commercial fishing crews to archaeological projects, museum consultation committees, and land claims negotiation tables. The ideas presented in the following paper have largely sprung from the contrast between these individuals and the stereotypical view of the Aboriginal that is common in both the academy and among the publics of Western nations.

The growing interest and involvement of Indigenous peoples in the archaeology of postcolonial states is a development that is undoubtedly beneficial to the continued growth of historical knowledge. The expansion of Indigenous sovereignty over lands containing archaeological remains has often enhanced the protection, preservation, and archaeological use of these remains. The specific interests brought to the field by Aboriginal scholars have encouraged a welcome shift in emphasis toward an appreciation of historical rather than systematic explanation, and of the role of the individual in history. The following discussion should not be interpreted as questioning the many beneficial archaeological projects that encourage the participation and collaboration of Indigenous people, or that promote the use of archaeological findings and interpretations in Indigenous programs of education and cultural revival. Difficulties arise, however, when archaeologists accede to claims of Aboriginal exceptionalism and incorporate such assumptions into archaeological practice. These are the proponents of the “Indigenous archaeology” that is perceived as problematic in the title of this article.

Randall McGuire’s often-cited paper “Archaeology and the First Americans” provides a good point of entry into our exploration of Aboriginalism and Indigenous archaeology, with its question “Why are scholars (archaeologists, historians and anthropologists) the stewards of Indian pasts?” (McGuire 1992:817). The obvious answer is that historians and archaeologists are the stewards of the past for most nations and ethnic communities. McGuire,

however, assumes the American situation to be both anomalous and negative, and argues unconvincingly that it arises from the perception of Natives as a vanishing race and from government policies deriving from that assumption. The more appropriate question would seem to be “Why are so few Native Americans engaged in archaeology?” An important part of the answer to this query lies in the lack of educational and economic opportunity available to many Aboriginal communities. However, another very significant factor is the widespread assumption that techniques developed in a rationalist scientific tradition are not appropriate to the investigation of the Aboriginal past.

The assumption of exceptionalism also allows Aboriginal individuals and groups to assume rights over their history that are not assumed by or available to non-Aboriginals. These privileges go beyond those that are normally accorded to the governments of sovereign territories, and include proprietary rights over archaeological and other heritage materials, jurisdiction over how these materials are investigated, and claims to authority over the dissemination of information recovered by archaeological and historical research. Rather than question the assumptions from which such privileges are derived, archaeologists have proposed a variety of accommodations. Some are benign, involving constructive efforts to communicate, engage, and work in collaboration with local Indigenous communities. However, the proponents of a more directed form of “Indigenous archaeology” seek to appease Indigenous opposition by incorporating non-Western values and perspectives as sources and methods of investigation, or by explicitly aligning their efforts with the historical interests of specific communities or groups. This paper argues that such efforts are not only theoretically unsound, but are detrimental to both archaeology and to Indigenous communities.

What Is the Problem with Archaeology?

This paper assumes that the central purpose of archaeology, whether as an academic discipline or as a resource management practice, is the increase of knowledge regarding human history. Interestingly, this crucial concern seems of little relevance to those who are most vigorous in promoting the development of Indigenous archaeology. Rather

than discussing potential contributions to knowledge of the past, the interest of these proponents is focused on mitigating the presumed negative effects of archaeological practice on the living descendants of the communities that are studied by archaeologists.

During the past several decades, the representatives of Indigenous cultural and political organizations have made archaeologists very aware of the prevalently negative perceptions of their discipline: archaeology’s narratives regarding Native history compete with and often deny traditional Indigenous views on the subject; archaeology removes ancient Native artifacts and human bones from their natural resting place and converts them into commodities that are owned by non-Native institutions; archaeology uses Indigenous history as a resource that archaeologists and museums exploit to build their reputations in non-Native society. Deloria’s (1995) monograph *Red Earth, White Lies* provides a definitive catalogue of such complaints, in which archaeology takes the brunt of a more general attack on the problematic aspects of Western science.

The view that archaeological interpretations of the past denigrate Native cultural heritage and belief is widely held in the world of Indigenous political and cultural leadership. However, the most explicit and serious charges come from archaeologists themselves, some of whom accuse the discipline of inadvertently, implicitly, or in collusion with state governments, depriving Indigenous peoples of both their past and their rightful existence in the present world. Watkins (2003:137) charges that the rationalist perspective of science segregates humans from nature, and thus views Indigenous history as merely a segment of global human heritage; Native American philosophy, however, “serves to integrate humans with the natural world through a philosophical understanding of the interrelationship of human and nature” (Watkins 2003:37) This relationship presumably operates on a local level, linking people with the land that they occupy, so that the concept of the American past as part of a global human heritage that is amenable to scientific investigation “removes American Indians from the stage. It also removes American Indians from the present by denying them their past as the foundation on which their current cultures are based” (Watkins 2003:137).

Taking a somewhat different approach, Zimmerman (2006) argues that conflict arises from fundamentally opposed conceptions of the past. To archaeologists, the past is a distant entity that is evidenced by artifacts and other remains, whereas "Indians know the past because it is spiritually and ritually a part of daily existence and is relevant only as it exists in the present" (Zimmerman 2006:171). The outcome of archaeological practice and perspective is seen to be identical to that postulated by Watkins: "When archaeologists say that the Native American past is gone, extinct, or lost unless archaeology can find it, they send a strong message that Native Americans themselves are extinct" (Zimmerman 2006:171). This diagnosis resembles that proposed by Martin (1987a:16), who argues that Native Americans fascinate historians "with their astounding ability to annul time, their remarkable capacity to repudiate systematically time and history." By constraining the study of Indigenous peoples to the perspective of rationalist linear history, invalidating their cyclical world of myth, "we surely strangle these people" (Martin 1987a:16).

Smith (2004:17) goes beyond the commonplace linking of archaeology to colonialism and scientific imperialism, in proposing that "archaeological discourse and knowledge may become mobilized as a technology of government to govern particular social problems and issues." With a specific focus on practices in the United States and Australia, she concludes that archaeology is used as a means "to define, understand and regulate truculent populations and the social problems and issues that they present for the state" Smith (2004:17).

Whether seen as an instrument of a coercive state or simply as a tool for sustaining academic life and reputation, these scholars assert that archaeology serves to deprive Indigenous peoples of their right to define their own place in the modern world, and that it is an effective weapon of assimilation to mainstream cultures. This analysis is well summarized by Custer (2005:3), who enthusiastically embraces the view that "Archaeologists have created a thought world which serves to support their own power and privilege, harms the interests of American Indian people, and aids the ongoing cultural genocide focused on Native Americans."

The arguments and conclusions listed in the previous paragraphs are based on a number of assump-

tions regarding Indigenous peoples, suppositions that are highly dubious but which are rarely and very quietly questioned in the current academic world. Clifton (1990:13) noted almost two decades ago that standards of etiquette in the academic environment include norms and taboos of deferential behavior in any dealings with Indigenous people. "The taboo on scholars writing anything that is likely to annoy native peoples is one expression of this explicitly partisan, condescending ethos" (Clifton 1990:13), an ethos that extends to scholarly organizations, law, the mass media, and government. This characterization of scholarly etiquette continues to be valid. Sheridan (2005:63), referring to relations between Native and non-Native scholars, characterizes current American ethnohistory as a field in which "No one is exactly sure what the ground rules are, yet no one seems willing to have them spelled out because of confrontations that might ensue." In ethnology, Suzman (2003:399) notes that "Despite the fact that the indigenous rights doctrine is out of step with much contemporary anthropological thinking, few anthropologists have criticized it. Of the few who have, most have been careful to add the caveat that their critique is intended for theoretical consumption only." Dyck (2006) analyzes the development of similar limitations on the work of Canadian ethnographers during the late twentieth century, noting that:

in the late stages of an age of identity politics, considerable care has been invested in grooming anthropologists not so much as intellectuals but rather as practically oriented professionals who wish to proclaim their sympathies and solidarity with Indigenous peoples and to place their services at the disposal of Aboriginal leaders [2006:87].

He remarks that the self-deprecation and self-censorship adopted by anthropologists working with Canadian Aboriginals "contrasts vividly with the determinedly independent and critical stances exhibited by ethnographers who strive to chart the politics of nationalism, civil war, violence, and human rights abuses around the world" (Dyck 2006:87). This analysis can quite validly be extended to the training and work of archaeologists who support the notion of an Indigenous archaeology.

As a result of the assumed harm caused by archaeology to Indigenous people and societies, support for the concept of Indigenous archaeology is almost universally set in a framework of “ethics” of archaeological practice. The fact that this framing has remained unexamined and unquestioned must be attributed to the etiquette described in the previous paragraph. This silence has given rise to a sense that archaeologists who champion forms of Indigenous archaeology are somehow “more ethical” than those who might question the concept. I suggest that we might best lay aside this inference of comparative integrity before examining the arguments presented in the remainder of this paper.

An equally questionable assumption that is made by proponents of Indigenous archaeology relates to these individuals’ essentialist views on the nature of Aboriginal peoples and societies, and of the unique qualities and abilities that set Indigenous peoples apart from European and Euro-American populations (excellent examples of such views have been previously cited from Martin 1987a; Watkins 2003; and Zimmerman 2006). Aboriginals are assumed to have a special relationship with and understanding of the natural world. Their perception of time as cyclical or continuously present is more complex and less limiting than the linear concept of time on which Western historical scholarship is based. Some follow Deloria (1995) in characterizing Indigenous peoples as having access to a superior understanding of the past than that offered by the Western historical tradition and Western scientific methods. This ability is presumed to result from an enduring relationship with local landscapes, and from a unique capacity of Aboriginal historical and cultural traditions to preserve a deeper, and in some sense a more truthful, narrative of the past than that available to non-Aboriginal societies (Trask 1987:178).

These characteristics of an essentialized Aboriginal culture can be rationalized only through an assumption that contemporary Aboriginals are the inheritors of long and essentially unchanging cultural traditions that are tied to specific regions and environments. Identification with local lands, a profound understanding and commitment to stewardship of local environments, and the creation and transmission of deep historical and cultural knowledge, are generally understood as arising from countless generations of persistent occupation in a

specific region. The projection of current ethnic definitions and identities into the past, as well as the assumption that local societies have been historically stable and enduring over great periods of time, may be psychologically rewarding to contemporary communities. It has also proved legally useful in negotiations regarding land use and ownership.

However, history and archaeology attest that assumptions regarding the endurance of unchanging local cultural identities are unlikely to reflect what actually happened in the past. On the contrary, the accumulated evidence of history demonstrates that all of our ancestors have at some point lost their homelands, taken over the homelands of others, mixed with other societies and changed beyond recognition over time (Lowenthal 2005:407). Claims of Aboriginal uniqueness, like those of national or any other ethnic distinctiveness that are based on belief in the persistence of ancient and unchanged societies, are clearly untenable from the viewpoint of Western historical and scientific scholarship.

The fact that archaeologists choose to participate in the essentializing of the Aboriginal, despite the fact that their knowledge and their rationalist view of the past denies the historical prerequisites for such a view, is difficult to comprehend. It is clearly associated with the fact that Indigenous interests and demands regarding archaeological practice are enmeshed in the entire complex situation of negotiation and accommodation between Aboriginal and settler populations in the Americas, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. More specifically, Smith notes that Aboriginal historical assertions are “part of wider negotiations with governments and their policy makers about the political and cultural legitimacy of Indigenous claims to specific rights, not least of which are rights to land” (Smith 2004:16). In the analogous case of social/cultural anthropology, Plaise (2003:397) suggests that “In its guise as the discipline interested in cultural diversity, it [anthropology] could be construed as the academic wing of the indigenous rights movement, whose role is to advocate the rights of vulnerable cultural minorities.” She notes that individual anthropologists, as members of liberal Western society, condone the “seemingly racist policies” of ascribing exceptional qualities and rights to Aboriginal peoples simply

because they find it distasteful to watch the disintegration of traditional societies (Plaice 2003:397). There is little doubt that archaeologists in settler societies are susceptible to the same temptations.

Sheridan (2005:76) suggests that the only intellectually honest way for a historian to approach such situations is by taking a stance of "strategic essentialism," through conjecturing an essential difference between Aborigines and non-Aborigines in order to help shift the center of power away from the hands of the colonizer. Sheridan's intellectual honesty would seem to be more fairly characterized as political commitment. It is also worth noting that the social theorist G. C. Spivak (1988), who initially defined the concept of "strategic essentialism" as an effective tactic in colonial struggles, has long since renounced its use. Duncanson (2005:28) quotes Spivak as remarking in a 1990 interview that "Essentialism is like dynamite, or a powerful drug: judiciously applied, it can be effective in dismantling unwanted structures or alleviating suffering; uncritically employed, however, it is destructive and addictive."

In a broader context, the intellectual stance of archaeology with regard to the Indigenous is a sidebar to discussions regarding human rights, cultural pluralism, and modes of accommodation in multicultural societies (Ignatieff 2001; Kymlicka 1995; Niezen 2003; Taylor 1994). These debates necessarily revolve around questions of cultural relativism in contest with assumptions regarding the universality of rights, moral values, and the will to political self-determination. Do universal human rights trump local traditional or religious practice? Is there a place for collective rights as opposed to the rights of the individual? What are the limits of self-determination in pluralist societies? Questions such as these hang in the background of any confrontation between the universality of scientific practice and the particular values and beliefs of local societies. Unfortunately, these debates have produced little guidance to the negotiation of specific situations such as those arising in the archaeology of ancestral Indigenous peoples.

Savages, Primitives, Natives, Aborigines, Indigenes: A Short History of Aboriginalism

Niezen (2003:3) notes with astonished approval the momentum that the concept of "Indigenous

people" has recently acquired on the world stage of political and social ideas:

The interesting thing about the relative newness of this concept is that it refers to a primordial identity, to people with primary attachments to land and culture, "traditional" people with lasting connections to ways of life that have survived "since time immemorial." That this innovation should be so widely accepted is a startling achievement [Niezen 2003:3].

Other anthropologists view the same phenomenon less optimistically, interpreting it as the resurgence in both anthropological and political discourse of the concept of "primitive people" under a new disguise (Béteille 1998; Clifton 1990; Kuper 2003). The official recognition by national governments, as well as by the United Nations and other international organizations, of Indigenous peoples as societies with common attributes, common problems, and common rights, appears to have rescued this long-discredited concept from the anthropological rubbish heap. As noted above, anthropologists and archaeologists have been susceptible to abetting this resurrection by agreeing to ascribe to Indigenous communities a common set of intellectual and moral characteristics that set them apart from non-Aboriginal societies.

This development is perhaps not surprising, despite a century of social theorizing on cultural diversity that has valorized the equality of human capabilities, and drawn clear distinctions between the genetic and cultural attributes of societies. Biolsi (1997:136) suggests that "Anthropology as a discipline has not been able to escape [the] conceptualization of the primitive, which is deeply embedded in the way Western civilization in general and American civilization in particular, constitutes itself. In fact, the Western, modernist concept of the primitive is what makes anthropology intellectually possible." Whether or not we agree that this is true with regard to the discipline of ethnology, it is certainly not for the archaeological study of ancestral Indigenous peoples. If archaeologists are tempted to perceive the subjects of their study (and their contemporary descendants) as primitives, they do so not from intellectual necessity but from consciously or unconsciously drawing on stereotypes that have a long and compelling allure within the Western cultural tradition.

The seductiveness of these abstractions may be illustrated by the great historical depth that they possess, and the use to which they have been put. Following Diamond (1974) and others, Biolsi (1997:135) summarizes the view that Western society requires a fictional “primitive” to define its “civilized” self: “The primitive is a concept generated out of the social and cultural dynamics of state-level societies and modernity.... The self-identity or subjectivity of people in state societies ... requires a concept of the primitive both to bound and to give content to the concept of the civilized.” The argument derives from the same dialectical thinking that spawned Said’s (1978) contention that “the Orient” was invented as a necessary contrast through which Western scholars could celebrate the social efficiency, technical preeminence, and the moral and intellectual superiority of their own societies. Although this may be true in the case of Orientalism, an examination of the historical use that Western society has made of the fictional primitive suggests a very different inverse mode of comparison. Among social theorists and other academics, primitive societies are more often ascribed splendid qualities that are lacking in those of the civilized world. This perception may also explicate the mechanism by which the concept of the Noble Savage became a basis for the self-definition of many contemporary Indigenous peoples.

Scholars in the Western intellectual tradition have long compared their own societies with that of a mythological Golden Age, or with the societies of barbarian or savage peoples that retained the characteristics of that age. Like the social theorists of the past few centuries, those of Imperial Rome experienced ever-widening knowledge of strange lands and stranger populations. Roman poets and philosophers reacted to these new peoples in an interesting fashion: they consistently admired the hospitality, courage, morality, and love of freedom that appeared to characterize barbarian societies, and that mitigated their indolence and ignorance. Some barbarians were described in terms reminiscent of the ancient inhabitants of the Golden Age, and this period of simplicity and ease seems to have continued in some manner to exist among the peoples who lived beyond the bounds of civilization.

The description of barbarian societies also

served as a means of commenting on the immorality and corruption that poets and scholars saw in their own world. Tacitus’ (1914) *Germania*, an ethnography of the peoples who lived beyond the Rhine frontier, blended repugnance of their sloth and disorder with respect for their honor, hospitality, bravery, sexual morality, and democratic mode of governing. Historians such as Tacitus (1914:29–32) and Cassius Dio (1925:3–5) wrote fictional speeches for barbarian military leaders in which they praised the barbarians’ bravery, endurance, and ability to live with and from nature, in contrast to the weakness and cowardice of Romans who depended on their military technology to secure victory. These exercises in fictional rhetoric were meant for Roman ears, and their format was clearly designed to allow critical views of Roman society to be expressed by scholars who obviously preferred that such views not be openly expressed as their own.

The concept of the noble barbarian seems to have disappeared with the decline of Roman civilization, perhaps because of an increase in firsthand experience of tribal peoples, and the transformation of Europe into semiautonomous social units that no longer had a barbarian “other” with which to compare themselves. However, the penchant for romanticizing barbarian character, for relating this character to an idealized Golden Age when humans were closer to the land, and for using the barbarians as a foil to demonstrate the failings of contemporary European society, reappeared in the descriptions of peoples that were encountered by the explorers of the European Renaissance. It is quite apparent that these similarities are more than coincidental, as fifteenth-century voyages of discovery coincided with the efforts of scholars and translators to recover the long-forgotten texts of the Classical past. The historical and geographical knowledge of the Classical world was a primary source of information for the explorers of the Renaissance, and for those who recorded and interpreted their accounts of discovery. Porter (1979:45) notes that antiquity supplied “ready made ‘myths’ which literate explorers could use as an allusive framework for the accounts of their exploits.” Classical allusions occur throughout the reports of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century discoveries, and most prominently in discussions of the Native peoples encountered.

Ellingson (2001:22–26) credits the Parisian lawyer Marc Lescarbot with inventing both the discipline of Anthropology and the concept of the Noble Savage. After spending the year 1606–1607 at the fur-trading post of Port Royal on the Bay of Fundy in eastern Canada, Lescarbot argued that the local Mi'kmaq shared with European nobility the patterns of moral and social life that had been preserved from an ancient golden age. The lawyer saw these patterns as deriving from the practice of hunting, an activity that in France was reserved to the Nobility, and that was associated with the charity and generosity of an ancient world (Lescarbot 1928:267 [1609]). Lescarbot's analysis of New World society was widely translated and played an important role in the development of social theory during the following century.

In contradiction of standard histories of anthropology, Ellingson (2001) is correct in asserting that neither Jean-Jacques Rousseau nor any other social philosopher of the Enlightenment thought of the Noble Savage as anything more than an ancient theoretical possibility, a hypothetical creature who served as a useful rhetorical foundation for theories on the development of human society. Despite Locke's (1980:49 [1690]) famous dictum that "Thus in the beginning all the world was America," he used the descriptions of Aboriginal peoples in the same way as he did those of Biblical and Classical times, as examples of those that have progressed to various points along the theoretical pathway from nature to the development of civil society. A century later, Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* clearly states the view that noble savagery did not exist, and that human nature was consistent throughout the world and throughout history (Hume 1975:65 [1777]).

Lewis (1999) derives the discipline of anthropology, and especially the Boasian school of Americanist anthropology, from this intellectual tradition. He laments what he takes to be the recent abandonment of its basic principles in favor of an "us and them" perspective in which comprehension of other cultures is illusory. However, this post-modernist perspective also has a long intellectual tradition in anthropology. Whereas Boas' (1911) *The Mind of Primitive Man* argued that all human minds operate on identical principles and differ only through cultural input, Lévy Bruhl's contemporaneous *Les fonctionnes mentales dans les*

sociétés inférieures (published in English as *How Natives Think* [1966]) characterized primitive thought as prelogical, mystical, and impervious to "rational" learning through experience.

The rationalist tradition in anthropology, arguing the psychic and intellectual unity of mankind, has always been challenged by a romantic tradition that has perpetuated a view of the Primitive as a special class of human who is probably not quite ready to join contemporary world culture and society. This perspective survived the Enlightenment discussions of social philosophy, gained strength in the literature and oral traditions of nineteenth-century colonial administration and Christian missionary activities, and gained academic credibility with the development of anthropology as a scholarly discipline.

The Culpability of Anthropology

A reading of the history of anthropology supports Ellingson's (2001:4) contention that "the Noble Savage was indeed associated with both the conceptual and the institutional foundations of anthropology." Following Stocking's (1987:243–256) close analysis of the discipline's origins, he detects the concept arising in scholarly disputes carried out against the background of the U.S. Civil War that was being fought over African slavery. On the one side were the anatomists who argued the biological inferiority of Africans and other Indigenous peoples, on the other were the archaeologists and ethnologists who believed in the equal capacity of all humans. By the late 1860s, the latter faction had triumphed and their views, which in England had developed from those of the Quaker-led Aborigines Protection Society, became the defining discourse of the new discipline of anthropology. "Equal but very different" could have been their watchword, as the developing field defended the position of its philanthropic intellectual ancestors against the racialist views of colonial soldiers and administrators. Of the later nineteenth century, Stocking (1987:273) notes that "If few in this period questioned the white Europeans' evolutionary mission, many anthropologists continued in kindly scholarly fashion to play the roles of defender of savage ways of life and explicator of savage modes of thought—roles clearly premised on a sense of moral obligation."

Of the same period, Kuper (1988:9, 14) argues that the development of a concept of “primitive society” was sustained by the dynamics of scholarly behavior: “Primitive society then became the preserve of a new discipline, which soon developed a sophisticated set of techniques for kinship studies. When this happened, the survival of the idea of primitive society was ensured.” The concept, together with related notions concerning primitive mentality, primitive religion, and primitive art, became the central orthodoxy of anthropology. From this base it permeated the political and historical consciousness of Western intellectual society, where it has persisted to the present day.

Extending Kuper’s analysis, we could note that although anthropology announced itself as “the study of Man,” this assertion was eroded during the early twentieth century by a florescence of academic disciplines that also studied humanity, including economics, psychology, oriental studies, and sociology. Anthropology retreated to a smaller but more defensible academic niche: the study of ancient humans and of the small societies that lived beyond the mainstream of world events. Social and cultural anthropology became the study of the Indigenous, the “peoples without history” whose ways of life were thought to have changed little since ancient times. The interests of anthropology, as an academic discipline, would seem to have lain in emphasizing the unique characteristics of Aboriginal cultures, those traits that set them apart from the peasant and urban societies that at the time were studied by other academic disciplines. This allowed great scope for developing the “equal but very different” concept, especially as it could be applied not only to social and economic life but to the worldview, languages, and belief systems of Aboriginals. Although Indigenous people generally lived with less technology, and at a less complex socioeconomic level than the colonial peoples who had displaced them, the doctrine of “equal but very different” suggested their potential for possessing and developing less tangible qualities, and such qualities began to emerge from anthropological descriptions. The unique character of these subjects, developed especially during the period of “culture and personality” studies in the first half of the twentieth century, provided clearly defined boundary markers for the discipline of anthropology, markers that could be used to repel the poach-

ing of economists, sociologists, or orientalists.

By the mid-twentieth century, the unique thought patterns of Aboriginals had become an academic reality. Anthropological linguists (Hojer 1964 [1950]; Lee 1938; Sapir 1931; Whorf 1956 [1937]) convinced many scholars that thought processes were necessarily conditioned by the construction of individual languages. The great diversity of Aboriginal languages became a measure of the diversity that could be expected in thought patterns, and of how different these could be from those of Europeans. The evidence suggesting wide diversity in thought patterns and world views, however, did not prevent anthropologists from continuing their long tradition of sustaining the stereotype of the “primitive” mind. Although *La Pensée Sauvage* is not as prescriptive as the English title *The Savage Mind* would suggest, as late as the 1960s Claude Lévi-Strauss could still essentialize the primitive mind:

The characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness; its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality. ... The savage mind deepens its knowledge with the help of *imagines mundi*. It builds mental structures which facilitate an understanding of the world in as much as they resemble it. In this sense savage thought can be defined as analogical thought [1966:262].

In this early phase of the postmodernist movement, the Aboriginal had become a class of humans whose minds worked in ways that were different from those of civilized Westerners, and that might be incomprehensible to Western science. In more recent years this idea has been most thoroughly expounded by Sahlin (1995) in his celebrated debate with Gananath Obeyesekere on whether Western rational analysis can comprehend why Native Hawaiians chose to kill Captain James Cook.

Kuper (1988) contends that the concept of primitive society was developed and maintained by the structural needs of the academic discipline of anthropology. This argument can be extended through consideration of Keesing’s (1989) important, yet very little recognized, article titled “Exotic Readings of Cultural Texts.” Keesing argues that the reward structure of anthropology (like those of geographical exploration and travel writing) has

encouraged the announcement of new and increasingly exotic phenomena and interpretations. He cites the example of a colleague, invited to prepare a paper in honor of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who eagerly set to work analyzing the concept of “direction” as it was perceived by the Indigenous people whom he had studied. Eventually he realized that their concept and practice of direction naming and orientation was identical to his own, so he didn’t bother to complete and publish the paper. This sort of contribution would return little reward to its author, and would rarely if ever get published or even written. I suspect that the process of selective reporting has been very significant in the development of a paradigm defining Aboriginals as people who possess, among other unique or unusual attributes, an extraordinary and holistic understanding of their environments; who recognize time as a synchronous or cyclical rather than a linear phenomenon; who have enhanced qualities of spiritual realization; and whose oral traditions provide all of the information required to preserve an ancient and unchanging view of the world and how it should be inhabited.

The preceding pages have argued that Aboriginalism, the paradigm of “The Aboriginal” as an individual and a society that is essentially different from the non-Indigenous, is a delusion that has been fostered by the practice of anthropology. But of course Aboriginals have had their own say in the matter. Lescarbot’s characterization of the Mi’kmaq, described above, may have been based less on observation than on discussions with French-speaking Native acquaintances. His leading informant on Mi’kmaq life, Membertou, was also the local leader who explained Mi’kmaq society to the Jesuit Fr. Pierre Biard five years later. Biard reported that:

They consider themselves ... braver than we are, boasting that they have killed Basques and Malouins. ... They consider themselves better than the French; “For”, they say, “you are always fighting and quarreling among yourselves; we live peaceably. You are envious and are all the time slandering each other; you are thieves and deceivers; you are covetous, and are neither generous nor kind; as for us, if we have a morsel of bread we share it with our neighbor” [Thwaites 1896–1901:1:173].

This rhetoric had no effect on the Jesuit’s negative views of the Mi’kmaq, but the lawyer–ethnologist Lescarbot may have been less critical. Mi’kmaq self-regard as braver, more honest, and more generous than the French may have been a primary source of Lescarbot’s depiction of the native Acadians as inheritors of the same moral qualities that characterized the royalty and nobility of Europe. Lescarbot, whose decision to come to Acadia was occasioned by a recent injustice and his consequent disenchantment with Parisian society, may have been more disposed to accept Mi’kmaq opinion of their own culture. A shared view of social comparisons may have been developed during a long winter of discussions between Membertou and the lawyer. Such a mutually reinforcing process would have served different purposes for the disillusioned French philosopher of society, and for the Mik’maq engaged in defining their relationship with the new settlers, but it would have supported the establishment of a shared belief in the unique differences that existed between European and Aboriginal societies.

An important mechanism in the self-identification of Indigenous peoples with the fictional primitive of European scholarship has been the development of recursive feedback between the writings of European scholars and the Aboriginal subjects of their texts. The process began very early in the encounter between European and American peoples. Thomas More’s 1515 fiction *Utopia* described the discovery of an island in the West Indies that was home to a perfected human society characterized by common ownership, religious tolerance, and a political system based on consensual decision rather than imposed authority. Utopia is Plato’s *Republic* crossed with the idealized New World societies described from the voyages of Columbus and Vespucci. It is clear that More did not invent the Utopian community as a plan for an ideal civilization but as a foil designed to highlight the problems and faults of contemporary English society. Yet barely 20 years after its publication Bishop Vasco de Quiroga began to found communities in Michoacan based on the customs of the Utopians. The creation of an ideal society seemed appropriate, as the bishop explained that “with much cause and reason is this called the New World, not because it is newly found, but because in its people, and in almost everything, it is like as was

the first Golden Age” (Porter 1979:47). It seems likely that these ideas were promulgated to the bishop’s subjects, the actors in his experiment to recreate the Golden Age.

A remarkable and much more recent example of feedback between European scholarship and Aboriginal belief can be found in the use of the “Adario dialogues” written by the Baron de Lahonton, a soldier who spent several years in Canada during the late seventeenth century. The most interesting section of Lahonton’s (1703) published account of his ventures is a series of long and obviously imaginary conversations with a Huron chief named Adario, a character who is usually thought to have been based on a noted warrior and diplomat named Kondiaronk who had died after failing to sabotage the Great Peace of Montréal.

Adario is presented as a philosopher of the Golden Age, and his role is to describe the superiority of Huron culture in order to point out the absurdity of Christian beliefs, the immorality of priests, the dishonesty of French legal and commercial practices, and the corrupt nature of French society. The argument is presented clearly and affably, and Lahonton is obviously using his imaginary debater in the same way as Roman historians used barbarians, or as Thomas More used Utopia, to speak truth to power without endangering his own prospects. However the Adario dialogues have become a favorite of aboriginal historians and cultural leaders, perhaps best exemplified by Georges Sioui’s (1992) *For an Amerindian Autohistory*. Here, a leading aboriginal historian presents Adario as an actual Huron philosopher recording, through his friend Lahonton, the truth about the Aboriginal way of life in ancient North America. This paragon not only demonstrates the clear superiority of Native American culture and society but “Adario had already foreseen the need for a world government and may be said to have helped lay the intellectual foundations for the great social revolutions of our own time” (Sioui 1992:81). A carefully nuanced but flattering introduction to the book was written by a leading archaeologist, the late Bruce Trigger (1992), and epitomizes the intellectual dilemma faced by archaeologists in attempting to accommodate the historical perspectives of Indigenous peoples.

Although a careful reading of Trigger’s testimonial absolves the scholar of supporting Sioui’s

interpretations, on the surface his statement appears to validate the concept of Aboriginalism. Other archaeologists (Watkins 2003; Zimmerman 2006) are less careful in expressing essentialized stereotypes of Aboriginal people. Such voices of scholarly authority serve to support the myths of Aboriginalism in the public mind, and Indigenous people in particular must be susceptible to such a gratifying view of their inherent qualities. Simard (1990:360) compares the situation to that of traditional Québécois who were prone to accept the dominant *Anglais* view of themselves. “Generation after generation [Aboriginals] have integrated into their own practical and intellectual life the dominant culture’s Owner’s Manual for being Indian” (Simard 1990:358). The chapters of the manual written by scientists who describe Aboriginals as possessing uniquely admirable qualities of thought, and exceptional abilities to understand the world, would be especially tempting to integrate into the self-perception of Indigenous people.

The transformation of scholarly writing into traditional knowledge has been well documented by Symonds (1999:119), who notes that in the Scottish Highlands oral histories telling of the traumatic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century clearances of agricultural populations have been replaced by traditions based on the accounts of popular historians. The work of writers such as John Prebble (1963) are now incorporated into traditional knowledge and “have become the new oral history” (Symonds 1999:119). Nicholas and Andrews (1997b:277) note the problem of “readback” when interpreting historical information provided by Aboriginal consultants; this caution should perhaps be expanded to include information on the self-perception of the consultants and their culture. The readback process must have occurred repeatedly among literate Indigenous communities whose culture and history have been described by anthropologists and archaeologists, sometimes in clearly essentialist terms. The assimilation of the Aboriginal stereotype is unquestionably abetted by the acceptance of the obverse Whiteman stereotype—materialistic, uncharitable, dishonest, cowardly, environmentally ruthless—as formulated by Lescarbot, Lahonton’s Adario, and countless other critics of Western society from Tacitus to contemporary anthropologists (Marcus and Fischer 1986:111).

Aboriginalism and Indigenous Archaeology

Do Indigenous people and societies possess inherent qualities and abilities, with special reference to historical matters, that distinguish them from non-Aboriginals? Despite the prevalence of assumptions based on the traditional construction of the Primitive, neither anthropology, archaeology, or any other field of study provides persuasive evidence in support of the view that Indigenous people possess a distinctive view of time and of history, a unique understanding of the natural world, or oral traditions that allow recovery of knowledge related to the distant past. Recent approaches to the subject rely on the presentation of rhetoric rather than of empirical evidence. Donald Fixico's (2003) *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World* enumerates significant differences between Indigenous and European ways of understanding the world, the most basic of which is the assumed fact that Indian thought proceeds from the understanding that circles and cycles are central to the universe, relating all times and all things. Thus "the linear mind looks for cause and effect, and the Indian mind seeks to comprehend relationships" (Fixico 2003:8) among phenomena as disparate as events, dreams, and ceremonies.

In a work subtitled *Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy*, Dale Turner (2006) repeatedly states the duty of Indigenous intellectuals to protect and defend the legitimacy of Indigenous ways of knowing the world. He is particularly interested in the power of Indigenous philosophy as the basis for political discussions and negotiations of rights, sovereignty, and nationhood. Turner stresses the idea that, if they are to be politically effective, Aboriginal worldviews must be made comprehensible to dominant Euro-American societies. However he (Turner 2006:116) is uncertain whether "indigenous philosophies are articulable in English" (and presumably in other non-Indigenous languages), and makes no attempt to articulate the ways of knowing which are basic to his argument. Rather than providing empirical evidence of Indigenous difference both Fixico and Turner argue that empirical evidence, in the sense familiar to the rationalist scientific tradition, is irrelevant to an understanding of Indigenous thought.

Layton (1994:4) discusses the problem of setting up an intellectual dichotomy between Western and non-Western modes of thought, noting that

"such dichotomies obscure equally interesting differences between the diverse cultures in the 'other' category;" and that in the particular case of historical perspectives "such simplistic thinking tends to attribute opposed functions to oral art forms and written literature." The series of essays collected by Layton from scholars on all continents presents a diversity of non-Western, indigenous, and rural approaches to history, yet provides no evidence of a simple nonlinear view of time past. Statements by individuals that they and their community view time as cyclical, or think of the past as eternally present, cannot be judged as other than anecdotal. Similar anecdotal evidence can be cited from the experience of the present author, who has found that Indigenous individuals have no obvious problem internalizing the concept of linear time that is a necessary component of living in the contemporary world. The same class of evidence suggests that Westerners share with other humans a sense of cyclical time in the recognition that every seasonal and communal celebration, be it Halloween, Christmas, Passover, Eid, Diwali, or Green Corn Festival, is the same celebration come round again, carrying its own freight of emotional recognition. Indeed, the notion of cyclical time as a unique attribute of non-Western peoples may be traceable to the questionable assertions made by the student of religions Mircea Eliade (1954) in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.

On the related subject of the historical accuracy of oral traditions, those of aboriginals seem to be at most marginally different from those of any other society. Nabokov's wide-ranging and sympathetic analysis of American Indian modes of history "endorses efforts to transcend old characterizations of Indians as victims or stereotypes and their traditions as monolithic and intractable. The many Indian pasts ... are as much stories of philosophical, ideological, and symbolic creativity and synthesis, inevitably processed through definitions of self, community, and destiny, as they are beads of discrete incidents hung on narrative strings" (Nabokov 2002:237). Instead of supporting claims of superior and more accurate knowledge of historical events, Nabokov stresses the importance of the individual storyteller, the context of narration, and the importance of multivocality as a foundation of Native historical approaches. He compares this complex perspective with the simple essen-

tialism displayed by Martin (1987b), much to the detriment of the latter. In discussing the San Pedro Ethnohistory Project, one of the most sophisticated and rewarding examples of collaboration between archaeologists and Indigenous historians, Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthaphonh (2006:247) state, "We do not advocate that archaeologists simply accept traditional histories in their entirety as literal truth. ... Nonetheless, we think archaeologists should seek to identify the social and cultural processes implicated in tribal narratives about the past."

Turning to other presumed qualities of the Indigenous, Krech (1999, 2005) and Mann (2005) have assembled sufficient evidence to discredit the romantic idea of Native Americans as natural conservationists whose ancestors did nothing to alter or harm the natural environment. No evidence has been presented to support a belief that Indigenous people possess a greater knowledge of their land or a more intense feeling for their land than do non-Aboriginal individuals, especially those who spend a great deal of time outdoors in one particular patch of country. The frequent assertion that Aboriginal lives are permeated by a sense of spirituality that is not available to non-Aboriginals has been criticized even by Deloria (1997:213), who laments that "a self-righteous piety has swept Indian country, and it threatens to pollute the remaining pockets of traditionalism and produce a mawkish unreal sentimentalism that commissions everyone to be 'spiritual' whether they understand it or not."

In summary, scholarly literature provides considerable evidence hostile to the tenets of Aboriginalism. In support of the concept that Aboriginal peoples have unique attributes that distinguish them from all other societies, one finds only assertions that are unsubstantiated by evidence or interpretation. The idea of Indigenous societies that are morally and spiritually superior to those of European ancestry has an intellectual allure, perhaps parallel to that of benevolent extraterrestrial visitors. Such uncorroborated beliefs, however, do not form a useful base for the construction of a special form of Indigenous Archaeology that is appropriate to the unique needs of Aboriginal peoples. In fact, most archaeologists' assertion of these needs, and their proposals for accommodating them, are distinctly condescending to those whom they intend to honor or placate.

The supposed problems that current archaeo-

logical practice causes for Indigenous communities were discussed earlier in this paper. The discipline is accused of disrespecting the religious and historical beliefs of Indigenous people, of disregarding the desire of Indigenous communities to define their own pasts and therefore their unique places in the contemporary world, of denying sophisticated Aboriginal concepts of cyclical or eternally present time and imposing on Indigenous history the simple Western notion of linear time, and of being an agent of coercive governments in abetting acts of cultural genocide.

Proposed solutions to these problems involve the development of forms of Indigenous archaeology that depart radically from the practice of archaeology as an academic and heritage management discipline. Few of these proposals have the clarity of Deloria's (1995:15) direct statement that "Much of Western science must go" before Aboriginal people can obtain a clearer understanding of their past. Some (Custer 2005) argue that archaeology can be practiced with a clear conscience only if it is carried out at the request of, and under the direction and control of, an Indigenous community. Others simply assume that "indigenous rights should always trump scientific inquiry" as Gillespie (2004:174) notes of the papers collected by Zimmerman et al. (2003). With particular reference to Australia, McNiven and Russell (2005:239) see the claims of archaeologists to academic freedom as no more than "part of the colonial fantasy of naturalized superiority and hegemonic control." Nicholas (2005:v) recommends that archaeology be willing to accept restrictions placed by Indigenous communities on the dissemination of data, and to accept publication moratoriums that may allow the subject community time to explore ways of benefiting from the data before others do.

Beyond the sharing of authority over the use of archaeological resources and the information derived from them, proponents of Indigenous archaeology generally require what Ridington (1999:20) calls "sharing theoretical authority" by moving beyond the canons/cannons of formal academic discourse. Such projects strip archaeology of the scientific attributes that make it a particularly powerful narrator of the past, and accord it at most equal weight relative to Indigenous oral tradition and religious discourse. Zimmerman (2006:173) predicts that "Accountability to Native Americans

will create a very different discipline, one that will not be scientific, according to our current standards." He proposes that the loss of scientific credibility may be compensated by access to a greater range of Indigenous knowledge, especially in the realm of the sacred, a suggestion rooted in the stereotyped view of Indigenous peoples as holders of sacred knowledge.

The problem of accommodating scientific demands to the requirements of local communities has been addressed more honestly and profitably by anthropologists. Noting the difficulties of reconciling empirical positivism with the faith-based assertions that underlie the belief systems of most communities, Brown states that:

Collisions between faith and fact are inevitable ... and there will be difficult moments when cultural anthropologists must decide whether we are *griots* and *griottes* [praise-singing bards] for our ethnographic partners or active participants in a transcultural community of scholars who answer to truth standards that many of our ethnographic collaborators find incomprehensible or offensive. Presumably we are both [2006:992].

Playing a game that has two distinct and often opposed sets of rules is neither easy nor often useful to either the player or to disparate audiences. Kuper notes that:

If anthropology becomes ... "the intellectual wing of the indigenous rights movement," if we report only what is convenient and refrain from analysing intellectual confusions, then our ethnographies will be worthless except as propaganda. Even as propaganda they will have a rapidly diminishing value, since the integrity of ethnographic studies will be increasingly questioned by the informed public [2003:400].

The doubts of an informed public regarding the veracity of anthropological reporting were expressed by Chief Justice McEachern of the British Columbia Supreme Court in the important Canadian land claims case of *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*. The judge excluded the testimony of anthropologist Richard Daly, which was considered suspect because he adhered to the American Anthropological Association's

code of ethics, which states that "in research, an anthropologist's paramount responsibility is to those he studies" (Culhane 1992:72).

Trigger (1997:x) offers a similar warning that "If archaeologists knowingly treat the beliefs of Indians differently than those of Euro-Canadians, there is a danger that the discipline will descend into mythography, political opportunism, and bad science." He also warns that "For archaeologists to take sides in political issues of this sort [in this case, denial of the Asiatic origin of Native Americans] risks interference in Native life that may be scarcely less patronizing than the interference of Indian agents and missionaries was in the past" (Trigger 1997:x). We cannot foresee the consequences of archaeological support for statements and perspectives that are consistent with Aboriginal belief but not with scientific evidence, any more than Indian agents and missionaries could accurately forecast the outcome of their activities. In any case, as Kuper (2003:400) reminds us, "Even if we could accurately weigh up the medium- and long-term political costs and benefits of saying this or that, our business should be to deliver accurate accounts of social processes."

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, and the advantages of accommodating a scientific discipline to the desires of a specific nonscientific community are not at all clear. Proctor (2003:223) perceptively notes that "Historians are familiar with the obstructive impact of ill-willed ideologies on science; less familiar are examples of political goodwill's stifling science." Indigenous archaeology, as proposed by its supporters, would appear to provide an exceptionally apt example of such a negative outcome. If the harmful effects of such a practice were restricted to its influence on the disciplines of archaeology and history, our concerns might be limited. However it can be argued that the impact of subverting scientific archaeology to the wishes or the control of local communities, extends beyond the boundaries of the academy.

As one example of such an impact, we might examine the relationship between archaeology and the Native land claims process in North America and elsewhere. Smith (2004) and others charge that

archaeology often serves, or is seen to serve, as a pawn of coercive government. There is no doubt that archaeology is useful to national governments engaged in dealing with Aboriginal populations, but perhaps not in the way suggested by the proponents of Indigenous archaeology. Anyone who has participated as an archaeologist in Canadian land claims negotiations soon realizes that government negotiators generally encourage, or do little to mitigate, the development of an emotional atmosphere surrounding the subject of archaeological remains. Such an atmosphere increases the value of control over the treatment and disposition of these remains, which then becomes a significant token that can be traded away in return for concessions on economic resources or other items of greater interest to government. Trigger (1997:viii) has also noted that politicians favor “ceding control over cultural matters to Native people as a less expensive and dangerous way to compensate them for centuries of injustice than giving them extensive political and economic powers.” If archaeologists are concerned at the thought of becoming government pawns, they should realize that—in Canada at least, and I suspect elsewhere—this process is most easily accomplished by acceding to the belief that Aboriginal peoples have unique needs to possess and control their archaeological past, thus artificially inflating the value of this resource when measured against the provision of economic and political powers to Indigenous communities.

A more important outcome of the legitimization of Indigenous archaeology lies in its reinforcement of stereotypes of Indigenous uniqueness. Wax (1997:53) has identified the problems caused by the ease with which Native American leaders find political leverage in presenting themselves to the world “as passive and abused ‘noble savages,’ torn from the mythic wilderness of the ages of European exploration.” Sahlins (1995:119) notes that academic efforts to defend Aboriginal ways of life by “endowing them with the highest cultural values of western societies” have the paradoxical result of “delivering them intellectually to the imperialism that has been afflicting them economically and politically.” In preserving and maintaining this essentialist self-image, they encourage perpetuation of their public stereotype as Primitives, as a special class of human who will always be marginal to the dominant culture and society.

The demands for Indigenous archaeology do not arise in response to an intellectual problem but, rather, from the emotions and political reactions of scholars to Aboriginal communities that are socially and economically marginal, and that conceive of this situation as the result of historical mistreatment at the hands of Western society. Nicholas and Andrews (1997a:12) feel that “As archaeologists and anthropologists from a dominant society, we have an obligation to contribute to the well-being of First Peoples.” Such a reaction is indeed admirable, if very patronizing. Any community must find means to alleviate the misery of its most marginal members, and archaeology’s association with the heritage of such peoples is a profoundly political engagement.

However, archaeologists must recognize that by using the authority of their discipline as a means of advancing causes based on assumptions of the unique needs and capabilities of Indigenous peoples, they risk following the trail blazed by ancestral anthropologists who first established Aboriginals as a special category of humans. This academic concept was to prove extremely useful in the theory and practice of colonial administration, generally to the detriment of the peoples administered. In conspiring to believe in the paradigm of Aboriginality, and in reinforcing it by providing historical justification, archaeologists are complicit in maintaining the intellectual conditions under which poor and marginalized Indigenous societies can continue to exist into the future. Rather than abetting such tragedies, we might emulate Kuper (1988:243) in hoping that “although certain things have been done badly in the past, we may still aspire to do them better in future. ... If we liberate ourselves, we may be able to free others. Anthropologists developed the theory of primitive society, but we may make amends if we render it obsolete at last, in all its protean forms.” Archaeologists can make an important contribution to this goal by exposing the myths of stable enduring societies on which the idea of the Primitive or the Aboriginal is founded.

Changing Archaeology

As many readers will conclude, there is little in this essay that has not been said before. In fact, the use of extensive quotations has been meant to fortify

that impression. This poses the question why, despite such broad agreement among analysts of archaeology and anthropology, do many practitioners of the disciplines continue to pursue, or at least accept the legitimacy of Aboriginalist goals?

The broad majority of archaeologists who are opposed to Aboriginalist views, and to archaeological practice based on these perspectives, appears to be constrained by the same code of silence regarding disagreements on Aboriginal issues that was reported by Clifton (1990) and more recently by Sheridan (2005). The prevalent and inappropriate framing of discussions on Indigenous archaeology as an issue of ethics arises from this situation, and in turn has contributed to its reinforcement. Removal of the debate from the context of ethics, and resituating it as a matter of intellectual and political concern, would do a great deal to advance clarification and ultimately a resolution of the issues involved.

Another factor in the silencing of critics arises from the fact that archaeologists are enmeshed in an academic culture that is still committed to the tenets of a declining postmodernist movement. Tenure, advancement, and the adjudication of research grants often involves the judgment of academic colleagues whose perspectives include the encouragement of equivocality in historical interpretation, and the importance of political perspective as a major factor influencing the reliability and trustworthiness of scholarly research. As noted by Clifton almost two decades ago, universities, granting agencies, academic societies, museums, and other institutions still have an almost irrational fear of offending Indigenous groups, and of the potential problems that might result.

Many archaeologists are also concerned regarding access to the Indigenous archaeological resource, which in most jurisdictions is now dependent on consultation with or the permission of local Indigenous communities. Continued access to archaeological materials is the subtext of many publications proposing the development of Indigenous archaeology. Ferris (2003:172–3), after documenting recent changes in legal attitudes that can be expected to provide increasing rights of North American Native groups over archaeological materials, suggests that archaeologists adapt to this situation by shifting from “a parasitic to a symbiotic” relationship with Aboriginal partners. McNiven

and Russell (2005:236) propose that archaeologists accept a “host/guest” relationship with Indigenous communities, which “have every right to control archaeological research in whatever way they wish.” Neither these nor other proponents question the intellectual grounds on which Indigenous peoples require unique interests in and rights over heritage materials. This may be a convenient stance at the present moment, but there are no assurances that such a position will be of long-term benefit to anyone. On the contrary, refraining from questioning the intellectual basis of current political assumptions can be expected to reinforce the political and legal constraints under which archaeology currently works. The consequent neglect of historical research on the history of Indigenous peoples will be interpreted, correctly, as the result of the racist attitudes of Western scholars toward the interests of Indigenous populations.

Dyck (2006:92) notes that North American ethnographers who do not insist on their rights to a free and independent anthropological voice will be increasingly constrained by “habits of self-censorship and situational silence.” This analysis applies equally to North American archaeology. It is surely absurd that many members of a mature academic discipline refrain from publicly stating their commitment to one of the most basic intellectual tenets of their field, that all humans are ancestrally related and have similar ranges of capabilities. Or that these same scholars publicly endorse, or at least do not oppose, a belief that they know to be patently false—that Indigenous people form a class of humans with unique qualities and abilities that are not shared by non-Aboriginals. The situation seriously impairs a field of study that could potentially make a significant contribution to the understanding of Indigenous cultures and their place in the contemporary world. It can be resolved only by full and candid discussion, yet such a debate seems unlikely to take place under present circumstances.

Lacking the opportunity for open discussion of these matters, Sheridan’s (2005:77) concept of an intellectual division of labor in historical studies may be relevant to archaeologists: “The challenge of Native American studies ... is to present indigenous perspectives in rigorous and reflexive ways. The role of non-Indian scholars is to learn from these perspectives without surrendering the insights

and rigor of their disciplines.” In this view, “Indigenous Archaeology” should be considered a branch of “Aboriginal Studies,” rather than as a component of the academic discipline of archaeology.

Beyond this definitional solution, change in the archaeological discipline can be effected primarily through the actions of individuals, actions that reflect a belief in the universal nature of human history and the value of historical knowledge. These actions include getting to know Indigenous people as individual acquaintances, rather than as contemporary avatars of an ancient ideal; dealing with the past as a place inhabited by real people and real communities, rather than by the abstract entities postulated by both processual paradigms and Aboriginalist belief; and working cooperatively with Indigenous people toward this goal, engaging them in archaeological research and learning from their genuine knowledge of their societies and the historical processes that have formed them (McGhee 2004).

Archaeologists who are convinced that their discipline is engaged in a project that is capable of contributing to a better understanding of the present world must be willing to support this conviction with determination. On the one hand, they cannot be intimidated by those who claim ethnically based special rights of access to archaeological materials, or special historical knowledge and abilities that are not available to those who practice science in the Western tradition. On the other hand, they must stand against those in the academic world who claim extreme forms of cultural relativism, equivocality among diverse approaches to knowledge, and the impossibility of relatively objective historical research. Something as important as the human past deserves both courage and thoughtful scholarship on the part of those who claim to make it their study.

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