

16 *First, be humble: working with
Indigenous peoples and other
descendant communities*

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Building partnerships between archaeologists and Indigenous and other descendant communities is difficult. Problems range from administrative, as with issues of seeking permission to work in a community, to substantive, as with epistemological disputes over the generation of knowledge. Some problems seem mundane while others provoke nearly intractable questions about the very nature of the past. All put intense pressure on the relationships that many archaeologists and community members wish to build. As many of the papers in this volume attest, those who have built such partnerships have had to struggle with these matters, and no problem is minor, especially while you are in the process of dealing with it.

In this paper, I reflexively consider several problems that I believe represent the range of issues in doing community archaeology. I'll start with the apparently simple matter of defining community, then move to issues surrounding informed consent, working from them toward epistemological perspectives. In no way are these three issues all the possible problems in doing community archaeology, but what hopefully will be apparent is that no simple approach to developing community archaeology exists.

PROBLEMS OF DEFINING COMMUNITY

The authors of papers in this book may be able to write about doing community archaeology with relative ease from hindsight, already having done a project involving a descendant community. But was it really that easy? Probably no, and in most cases, defining community was probably the first problem encountered in a project. The task may not be easy for an archaeologist, or for that matter even the community members themselves. There are some utilitarian sociological definitions, translated by archaeologists into concepts useful for settlement analysis. Chang (1968: 2) viewed the sociological concept of community as the proper social context in which artefacts were created, a unit that was easily discoverable and a universal: 'it defines the boundaries of social activities an individual daily engages in, and it molds or conditions an individual's mode of behavior and his view of life and the world perhaps more effectively than any other primary or

secondary social group'. Archaeologically, the community may be the most definable social group. The problem with this definition is that while it has social and archaeological utility, communities are more complex because they also have political dimensions, and they are not necessarily geographically bounded.

The politics of defining community might be deceptive for a naïve archaeologist. When I directed the Crow Creek Massacre project (Zimmerman *et al.* 1981) in 1978 I was exactly that: a very naïve archaeologist! I went into the project with a profound lack of experience with Native Americans. I had studied them for five years in graduate school, excavated numerous prehistoric sites, and had had four years of teaching Indians and working with them in South Dakota. Only five years after Wounded Knee II, I was very much aware of the difficult political climate in the state regarding Indians. But that wasn't enough.

The Crow Creek site contained the remains of nearly 500 victims of a prehistoric massacre from the fourteenth century, from a culture known to be ancestral to the Arikara nation. The remains were in danger of eroding into the Lake Francis Case from wave action, and by the time we began excavations, several skeletons had been looted and broken. The site was on federal property within the Crow Creek Reservation, inhabited by members of Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota Sioux, traditional enemies of the Arikara.

Almost immediately, some from the reservation claimed the massacre to have been the last big battle between the Sioux and the Arikara. As information about the intensity of the massacre was uncovered, including trophy taking and other mutilations, many backed away from that claim, contending instead that whites had carried out the massacre. The Corps of Engineers, with whom we were under contract for the excavation, insisted rightly on holding a community meeting, to which we agreed, and that is where we began to find that the 'community' really wasn't one, but several.

At the meeting and later, a number of groups surfaced. There was a community of relatively traditional people who believed that what we were doing was wrong. They insisted that we were disturbing graves and that the *wanagi*, the spirits that guard the dead, would act to protect the remains. Indeed, they believed that elders were already dying because these Arikara spirits were taking vengeance on the descendants of the Sioux who had killed them. The tribal council wanted the project to be completed for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that they despised the Corps of Engineers who had to pay for it. Many wanted the work done because they were very curious about what the massacre was and who had done it. There were American Indian Movement members who vowed that if we touched one more bone, they would kill us. And this was just the people at Crow Creek! The Arikara had their own views, ranging from those who wanted the project stopped to an elder who wrote telling me that what we were doing was good, and that figuring out what happened in the past was good. What I had assumed might be one or two groups turned out to have been utterly wrong; we had to deal with many!

In truth, we got lucky. When the lives of my crew were threatened, I pulled them out for two weeks and insisted that the Corps provide guards. These were

Bureau of Indian Affairs police. We also hired young people from the reservation to work with us. With reservation residents with us around the clock, rumors of our disrespectful handling of remains quickly dissipated, and on the recommendation of a crewmember, we invited a holy man to the site. He did ceremonies, and after spending the night in a sweatlodge with two skulls, declared that the '*wanagi* is gone,' and that it was fine for us to continue. As an aside, I did find out later that several residents did not like the holy man who did the ceremonies and declared the ceremony to be false. In the end, however, most matters worked out reasonably well. What helped a great deal to ease tensions was our openness, being willing to include tribal people in the process, and an agreement from the start that the remains would be reburied.

In many respects, the Crow Creek community is not at all atypical of American Indian communities where political tensions often run high over control of limited resources, impositions by federal and state governments, and a wide range of other factors that create factions. Traditional views and tribal government may be at odds, and who can speak for a given community is always a difficult matter to fathom. US law requires government agencies to deal with tribes on a government-to-government basis. Therefore, archaeologists doing federal projects must first work with a tribal council for access to any tribal lands or for consultation with any tribal members. This can immediately place you at odds with other more traditional factions that may have better access to oral tradition, language, and other important sources of information. Tribal councils may not even know who the traditional people are or may not direct you to them. Certainly even the definition of *Indigenous* can lead to complexities, with some groups suggesting that certain community members aren't 'Indian enough' to merit archaeological attention.

Others have had similar experiences with determining who is or is not a community member or with whom they should even speak. They suggest that descendant communities can be of many kinds, defined by their relationship to a site, which can be historical, cultural, symbolic, or may hinge on some other significant factor. Singleton and Orser (2003) refer to both local and diasporic communities. Singleton's work with African American communities in looking at a rice plantation in Georgia is instructive. She identified two groups with an interest in the site, descendants of the former enslaved populations in the area, many of whom were impoverished laborers and an urban-based, middle-class, African American community living in cities and towns throughout the state of Georgia. Similarly, Orser's research in Ballykilcline, in north County Roscommon, Ireland, has focused on the nature of rural life during the early nineteenth century, or the decades just preceding the Great Famine of the 1840s. During the famine, many residents emigrated to the USA, creating a community with an interest in the homeland, but with knowledge that is not first hand. At the same time, there are local residents with very different views.

With which communities do you deal? Working with one may alienate another, but all may contain vital information for interpretation of remains, a site, or a settlement pattern. Sometimes you haven't even learned of a particular group or sub-group until you've already alienated its members, and you have to work

especially hard to gain their trust. You may spend a substantial share of your time unraveling the tensions between the communities or factions. The simple fact of the matter is that defining community is no easy task and has risks that can cause a project to succeed or fail. To do community archaeology you have to take the risks, but you don't need to be naïve about them.

DIFFICULTIES WITH INFORMED CONSENT

No matter what the community, contemporary research standards and ethical codes demand that researchers seek the consent of those they study and inform them of both the benefits and risks of the study. Many agencies that fund research and many universities demand informed consent and have vested power in institutional review boards (IRB) to assure that informed consent happens. Much of the structure and documentation required by IRBs is derived from medical research where experimentation with new procedures and medications poses very real and immediate dangers. For social research, IRB approaches are often murky and demands made on scholars seem difficult because the impact of what they do seems vastly less clear. Still, though many archaeologists complain about the process of informed consent, few of us disagree with its purposes. The trouble is, unfortunately, many archaeologists believe what they do is not at all harmful, and may in fact bring enlightenment to those whose ancestors they study. Can the past really be that dangerous? In recent years, Indigenous people and members of other descendant communities have told us that it is. The concerns are real, and archaeologists should only do their research if they have given thought to the consequences of their work. On one level, the concerns are very direct and on another they derive from epistemological approaches, which I will discuss later.

What might seem to be minor regarding informed consent, but can be a real problem in descendant communities, is the way informed consent is documented. IRBs demand a paper trail, which usually means an informed consent document filled with legal-sounding terminology. For traditional communities my experience is that informed consent documents cause no end of trouble, but IRBs don't understand this. The problem may start with the fact that many in traditional communities don't read, and even if a document can be read to them, convoluted 'legalese' is intimidating! In addition, many Indigenous communities simply don't know how to handle the whole process of a researcher actually asking permission because it is an unfamiliar experience.

In a recent project on the cultural affiliation of Effigy Mounds for the National Park Service (NPS), Bill Green and I (Green *et al.* 2001) sought information about the mounds from tribal oral tradition. To do this NPS asked us to seek permission from any community with which we worked, and itself sent a document to each tribe informing each tribal council of the project. Green and I were then to follow this with our own documentation, which turned out to be a letter outlining the project, a request for permission, and a copy of an informed consent document modified from a template suggested by our university IRB. We were to provide

evidence of informed consent and permissions to the NPS before we could gather any information. We sent our documents to each tribal council and waited. We followed this up with telephone calls, e-mails, and letters, receiving only one letter of permission back from nearly a dozen sent out.

Even before we started the process, we knew there would be problems. Green and I are very well networked in the tribes with which we sought to work and had even solicited assistance with the project from community members as we prepared our original proposal. We already knew with whom we should talk, or at least had the contacts that could help us find the right people. As the months dragged on, and we still had no permissions, we talked with several tribal representatives who informed us that what we had done was a 'first', that no one had ever asked permission for this kind of project before with the result that our request had been passed from official to official, none of them knowing how to respond! In one instance, our local representative was asked to generate a research permission policy for her nation so that they could respond to us and deal with any future requests. In terms of the informed consent document, this same individual wasn't able to get a single informed consent document signed and returned. People were willing to talk, but not to sign a document they didn't trust because of its legal tone; tribal members had good reason to suspect such legal documents (read 'treaty') from prior experience. Many said that our word was good enough for them. Since the Effigy Mounds experience, I've had another in which I got back only one of ten informed consent documents, yet I was able to talk with seven of the ten anyway. There are institutional implications in all this. IRBs may face questions from external auditors about why procedures were not followed, and poor answers can jeopardize future research funding for the entire institution. The next time around, I will work harder to explain to the IRB how their paper trail can be alienating and self-defeating.

The paper trail is minor compared with the very direct and real dangers deriving from our interpretations. On the Crow Creek Massacre, when news of the discovery first broke, the Sioux claimed that their ancestors had carried out the massacre. As osteological analyses began to show the level of mutilations on the bodies, including scalping, reservation residents immediately backed away from their claims of their ancestors perpetrating the attack. As scholars we had thought nothing of discussing the mutilations with the media, and the information appeared internationally. What we failed to realize was that the mutilations fitted dominant society stereotypes of Indians as savages, and since this took place soon after the takeover at Wounded Knee in 1873, our information was used by racists to declare contemporary South Dakota Indian people to be savages. Similarly, even in our later suggestions that the cause of the massacre might have been internecine warfare over croplands, there were bitter denials: this was impossible because Indians wouldn't kill over such matters.

Ongoing debates about osteological evidence of Anasazi cannibalism in the Southwest provide similar fodder for stereotyping. Scholars continue to debate whether cannibalism happened there (Osborne 1997). The initial media reports in the late 1980s caused havoc for the Hopi, people who claim to be descended from

Anasazi. Cannibalism is so repugnant to most people that labeling an enemy as a cannibal is a common way of dehumanizing them. At a Society for American Archaeology (SAA) session in Phoenix, the Hopi Tribal Chairman asked us to please be more cautious in how we report our research. In Hopi disputes with the Navajo, coal companies, and on other issues, the hypothesized cannibalism became 'truth' and made life for the Hopi difficult. He told us that an Arizona legislator had asked his colleagues why they should be concerned about the Hopi because they were just a bunch of cannibals. The tribal chairman did not dispute the cannibalism nor ask the archaeologists to change their opinion. He simply pleaded for us to be more cautious in our use of archaeological data and to consider the consequences of the data or what we say about them for the modern Hopi.

In a case in Iowa, a state generally recognized for sensitivity to Indian concerns about archaeology, an osteologist reported to a statewide newspaper that he had found evidence of syphilis in skeletons in a prehistoric Iowa burial mound. Treponemal pathologies could be evidence of a variety of yaws-like diseases, one of them syphilis. The origin of syphilis has long been a matter of debate as to whether it went from the New World to the Old or vice versa. It is a very difficult disease to diagnose skeletally, and without specific tests, almost impossible to tell from similar diseases. After the osteologist announced that it could be syphilis, a firestorm broke loose. In several schools in Iowa non-Indian children, no doubt based on the news and the way their parents translated it to them, were heard saying to Indian children: 'Your mothers are whores!'

Most archaeologists cannot imagine what such attacks must feel like, but they should be aware that their interpretations can do real harm to self-image and may intensify stereotypic images already harbored by the dominant society. The examples here demonstrate obvious problems. More insidious troubles occur when archaeologists present their findings as truth and the archaeological accounts as the actual story of what happened in the past. Does archaeological truth undercut sacred history that is a foundation for identity? There is a fine line here, and that is on the edge of a slippery slope. If there is conflict between tribal story and archaeological story, should working with descendant communities demand that archaeologists allow censorship of their work? The better approach might be to realize that such conflicts are inevitable so that procedures can be worked out ahead of time about how to handle the differences. Solutions may be as simple as choosing words carefully and providing contexts for the differences.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL WORRIES

I would like to believe that most archaeologists are not evil, just unthinking. They have found themselves in an increasingly difficult position caused by a structural contradiction of scholarly forces demanding an explicitly scientific archaeology and social forces demanding self-determination, social equity and human rights, of both of which they are fundamentally supportive. Starting in the late 1960s, epistemological redefinition of the discipline pushed archaeologists toward a

positivist scientific archaeology in which there was but one version of the past, best knowable through archaeological interpretation. Although processual archaeology, as it became known, provided important insights for understanding cultural adaptation, efforts to apply rigorous scientific method alienated many who saw the past in more humanistic ways. Emphasis on artefacts and their contexts seemed to take precedence over people. For Indigenous peoples, a declaration that scientific archaeology provided a more truthful version of the past also seemed to be a statement that Indigenous versions of the past were not true, that oral tradition was limited, inaccurate and misleading (see Harris, Chapter 3 in this volume). By taking this position, archaeologists usurped Indigenous voice about the past. For the most part, archaeologists were just profoundly naïve and insensitive about the impact of their approaches on Indigenous people and to a degree, other descendant communities.

No one can really deny that archaeology is a fully Western discipline, deeply rooted in colonialism (see Kehoe 1998; McGuire 1997; Patterson 1994, for the Americas and Griffiths 1996, for Australia). As such, archaeology practices scientific colonialism, whereby the 'center of gravity for acquisition of knowledge about a people is located elsewhere' [than with the people themselves] (Galtung 1967). As Floyd Westerman (1982, album cover) sings in 'Here come the Anthros':

And the anthros bring their friends
To see the circus, watch the show,
And when their pens run dry,
they pack up their things,
and away they go.

and later in the same song:

And the Anthros keep on diggin'
in our sacred ceremonial sites.
As if there was nothing wrong,
and their education gives them the right.

Many descendant communities, and not just those of Indigenous people, feel victimized by an archaeology that doesn't speak to their needs. Archaeology can make a community's past intractable through jargon and lack of access. In packing up our things, and going away to our ivory towers, we claim their heritage, we usurp their voice (Zimmerman 2001), and we get paid bundles for it, compared with what they earn! We speak of the past as a cultural resource that is a public heritage and ourselves as being accountable to the public, but, in structural contradiction, we tell others and ourselves that we are the stewards of the past.

In other words, we are the ones who have the truth about the past. More than any other way of knowing the past, and whether processual or post-processual, scientific archaeology allows powerful inferences from artefacts in context. Although we recognize that we can't get at the perceptions of people very well,

and certainly have trouble getting at the meanings of what we see (if this is ever actually possible anyway), we still think that our approach is the most useful. Assuming this is a worthy goal for archaeology, with the help of community members, motives, meanings and perceptions should be made more apparent, but many archaeologists don't understand even this!

Severe problems in consultation between archaeologists and descendant communities derive from the tensions created by different ways of knowing and understanding the past and notions of what the past means. We certainly need to understand the basics of working with members of the culture. For example, understanding a culture's views of time or land are crucial (I've written about this often, but see Zimmerman 1989 for an early discussion of the issue), but we also need to understand their peculiar epistemologies about the past. Let me explain some epistemological issues at the core of these tensions, but in different ways than I have before.

THE INTERSECTION OF HISTORICAL MEMORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Archaeologists have long recognized that the descendants of the people we study know things about their ancestors, and they know things about their own lives. In historical archaeology, we recognize that written documents contain clues about people's lives and feelings. We intuited that they knew, as much as anyone could, what their lives meant. Yet we have remained suspicious, as we should be, even with written documents, about any truths contained in them. After all, we recognize that witnesses to events see different things; people tend to write about personal and cultural ideals as much as they write about the realities in which they live. They tend to describe their intentions, not the implications of their actions. We recognize that material remains give us access to a kind of truth that has its own life, one that may contradict the truths that people see in their own pasts and their own lives. In absolutist form, material remains can be used to challenge and even debunk constructions of the past based on other than the material. Used with such hubris, indeed arrogance, archaeology can be a cruel discipline (see Clark 1996, 2001; Mason 1997; Meighan 1985 for examples).

Validity or truth?

If we are at all sensitive, we should know that subaltern narratives of the past are often vastly different from the master narratives of dominant societies. We should know that the historical memories of descendant communities are often different from those of outsiders. Should these differences be important to archaeology? There is a difference between *validity* – authority based on arguments, proofs and assertions, or something that is well-founded – and *truth* – that which is real, in accordance with facts, and agreeing with a standard. These are delicate differences, the terms often confused with each other and used interchangeably, but they are

not the same, though they may overlap. In archaeology, we seek validity, not truth. Assessment of validity is based on the consistency of our assumptions, logic and data within a theoretical framework. We are not after truth, which is by definition perpetually and utterly elusive for scientists. As anthropologists we know that cultures are artificially created realities structured by perception, position in the environment and language. We know that different cultures create different truths. Most anthropologists have been trained to accept notions of cultural relativism, which assess the epistemologies of other cultures at face value, within the contexts of that culture. Yet we know that no group has a monopoly on truth about itself.

We need to understand, however, that many descendant communities are seekers of truth, not validity. Archaeological validity will have meaning and utility only insofar as it coincides with their truths. For some reason, archaeologists have a difficult time with this, perhaps because they don't understand that their quest for the past is different from that of non-archaeologists.

How pasts get formed

There may be but one past, but that past is a fabric constructed of multiple threads. The fabric is vast and complicated, beyond anyone's absolute comprehension. To know the past in the way that most archaeologists would seem to want, the past would need to be lived in real time. Even then the past is a matter of one individual's perception. The material remains provided by archaeological excavation and interpretations of them spin only one thread. Indigenous and other descendant communities spin out additional threads, a community's historical memory, often subsumed in oral tradition. Both archaeology and oral tradition are utterly mutable, reflecting the social and natural environments in which they find themselves. For archaeology this may be paradigm shifts, new technologies, and new discoveries. For descendant communities, this may be the death of an important elder, a major event, and an assortment of other possibilities. In other words, everything is perception and interpretation; there are no absolutes about the past. Looked at in another way, for any point in time, there are many possible pasts. We might like to believe or agree that there was an event at a point in time, but the reality is that if there was an event, it was connected to myriad other events, each of these subject to the perceptions of the people involved, however peripherally, in the happening. Understanding the implications of this is very challenging and questions the very definitions, both archaeological and descendant, of what the past is.

The stream of time

Let me use another analogy similar to notions of time as expressed in quantum mechanics and string theory in which there may be lots of 'times' or even parallel universes. Time is a stream. Time can be either linear, as emphasized by literate societies, or circular/spiral as with many societies emphasizing oral tradition. The stream moves, meanders and changes speed for a wide range of reasons. Currents

within the stream have different characteristics, some moving faster than others, with different temperatures, and carrying differing loads of sediment.

Descendant communities float somewhere within the stream. For them, what's important is what is happening now; that is, the emphasis is on the present, although there is full recognition that who and what they are have been influenced by where they've been. What's important is that they still *are*. The process of being carried by the stream is important, not the details of each current. As an individual community member, you just stay with the stream, and live your life. Aside from calamity, you do your best to keep floating down that stream, providing continuity to the future. In a sense, you become one with the stream, and that's what important. The processes that went on in the past are those that are happening now. This is very much like the concept of uniformitarianism to which most sciences of the past subscribe.

Archaeologists stand outside the stream of the community, on the stream bank perhaps, or maybe even in a boat floating on the surface. They sample the stream at different points along its course (I suppose one could imagine the archaeologist fishing in the stream). They may take the temperature, look at stream gradients, and attempt many others measures of the stream, but all they really get is bits and pieces and try to generalize the whole stream from it. They assume that the processes going on now are the same as those in the past, and that the present is the key to the past (uniformitarianism again). They might look at the stream at different spots along its course to see how it has changed and compare the stream near its headwaters and then near its confluence with another body of water. What's important is how the stream flows, what causes it to change speed or temperature. Archaeologists have to know that the sample is limited in many ways.

What I've described above are emic (community) versus etic (archaeology) as well as synchronic and diachronic views. The more important point is that neither view of the stream is complete. Both views of the same phenomenon are essentially 'true', but from the perspective of the other, limited and perhaps false. From the community perspective, because they are part of the stream's action, they will necessarily see the construction of the archaeologist as 'getting it wrong'. Because the archaeologist can measure, sample, and infer, but the community view is incomplete or constantly changing, the archaeologist might be tempted to say that the community view is incomplete, perhaps even myth.

In a nutshell, this means that both views are limited and both can be true to what is essentially the same thing. Looking more closely at the currents of the stream may help a bit. I'd like to propose that the stream is made up of at least four currents – a material culture current, a context current, an event current, and a meaning current – and briefly examine each.

The material culture current

For archaeologists the material culture current comprises all the elements of material culture used and affected by a community. The physical object is the one

element that archaeologists like to think is 'identical' for both the archaeologist and the community member. The entity exists and can be perceived, but how it is perceived with its physical attributes of mass, color or texture, and what these characteristics mean, is as culture bound as anything else. These are the artefacts, features and ecofacts found in a site. Without them, archaeologists really can't do much at all.

For archaeologists these objects or features have profound importance as carriers of culture, to the point of being fetishes, if worries about repatriation of remains is any indication (see Miller and Tilley 1984: 3). Archaeologists tend to believe the past resides in artefacts and their contexts, not in the present. This blinds them to the real people behind the objects, both the people who produced the objects, and the living people for whom the objects may be an element in the creation or substantiation of their own pasts. Many community members find the archaeological approach to be dehumanizing.

Even though the physical object is the same, anything beyond the morphology of the object itself may be different. The problem comes when archaeologists use artefacts (along with context) to interpret the meaning. Community members may see objects very differently. Those items archaeologists see as informational treasure, some community members may see as trash, sometimes being barely conscious of the object, let alone assigning it meaning. Some objects certainly have importance over others, and do vastly more than enter the realm of consciousness. Many people have objects containing intense meaning such as religious icons, heirlooms, or even favorite utilitarian items, but even these they sometimes acknowledge as not being able to 'take with them' when they die (unless they are grave goods!).

So much of what archaeologists interpret from material culture is by analogy to their own culture, with an underlying assumption of a common human heritage linking all cultures. This is a very slippery slope along the stream, as most archaeologists know, but often forget.

The context current

The context current comprises the spatial relationships of material culture objects, more than the objects themselves, and they also have cultural meanings. The primary importance of context for archaeologists is to assess function by building a set of relationships between multiple objects. Archaeologists often say that context is more important than the object itself because it is the context that allows interpretation. However, for community members, contexts of objects frequently change, and they are familiar with the shifts. The importance of context is to give an object meaning, not function, which they already know. Community members may recognize key contexts, but they rarely consider them directly as they come into contact with objects because they are often well known. Archaeologists may struggle to find a single context and consider themselves lucky to find more than one.

The event current

The event current might be defined as 'the things that happen' in the life of a community. Happenings may be the one thing that archaeologists and community members believe they share. Most archaeologists, and probably most Indigenous people, would agree that there was indeed only one set of circumstances or events that resulted in a particular grouping of artefacts and their contexts. This seems clear from ethnoarchaeological studies where archaeologists describe what they see people doing and the material results; they might even find the people in general agreement about reconstructions of the event (though differing descriptions of sequence or detail may vary dramatically as in many instances of witnesses to crimes and their testimony). But there are problems regarding the way past events are understood and assigned meaning. Archaeologists recreate an events current based on artefacts, contexts and a range of tools (dating, etc.) where chronology is important. Many descendant communities create an events current based on meaning, contexts and oral tradition, where chronology is not as important as the event itself.

The meaning current

Meaning is complex, but for most it means purpose (as opposed to function) or significance. Archaeologists have long understood the difficulty of getting at meaning. If anything, meaning is the divide that separates archaeology as a science from archaeology as a humanity or, if you like, processual from post-processual archaeology. Certainly meaning is more important to descendant communities than to archaeologists, though archaeologists would like to get at meaning (see Whittaker 1992: 56 for an example). Communities use the meaning current to interpret the event and material culture currents. As has been said by Indigenous people regarding archaeology: 'We know what our lives mean.' Roger Echo-Hawk's (2000: 272–3) discussion of a principle of memorability suggests that information about an ancient past 'will be more likely to persist if it is encrusted with nonhistorical cultural meanings and narrative elements that are specific to transmitting societies'.

Archaeologists, usually unable to get at meaning easily, necessarily strip objects, contexts and events of signification. Significance then gets assessed from within the context of archaeology itself, or perhaps in terms of what western culture thinks should be something's significance to a broader humanity. For example, archaeological signification is often assessed in terms of the first or the oldest, as in the first real city or use of written language, the oldest cave painting, or the largest known prehistoric massacre (as I told the media about Crow Creek). This may be why archaeologists often discuss the past as being a human heritage, not that of an individual group. Signifying pasts this way may demean the descendant community by putting meaning into a context that is profane, or perhaps just improper or inaccurate. A community may not care that some find of an impression of a plant

represents the first step toward human domestication of that plant, but they might care that it has been and is important in a ritual cycle that must be observed. In other words, archaeologists 'get it wrong'. This does not mean that archaeologists truly get it wrong, but that the points of reference are just very different.

ISN'T THE PAST THE PAST?

The stream has become terribly deep so I'll not venture much deeper. However, this question is an important one to consider. In brief, the answer is no. As archaeologists wishing to, or being forced to, consult with descendant communities, we need to understand that no, indeed, the past is not the past. The past is really *pasts*. If we are prudent, and want our consultation to succeed, we must be aware of how we know the pasts we create. We need to try to understand how descendant communities know the pasts they create. Certainly what I've written here has been written before in other ways. The problem is that it is easy to say all this, but it's really tough to understand it because it violates a human need for absolutes and a desire for easy, pragmatic solutions. Many processualists have an especially hard time with consultation because their approach is materialist and positivist. Much as Kehoe (1998) notes when likening New Archaeology to creationism, absolutists don't make much sense to others, in fact they are often downright irritating, but most especially to those they study.

This does not mean that archeologists can't do science; it's just that the kind of science they do cannot be absolutist if they hope to be successful at working with descendant communities. They would be better off following a view of science discussed by Jacob Bronowski (1973: 374) years ago in *The Ascent of Man*: 'Science is a very human form of knowledge. We are always at the brink of the known, we always feel forward for what is to be hoped. Every judgement in science stands on the edge of error and is personal. Science is a tribute to what we can know although we are fallible.'

How does this translate into practical advice for consulting with Indigenous and other descendant communities? First, be humble. Everything else follows more easily. Then, be respectful of the pasts you study, and you will find that the pasts you create will receive respect.

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Lajamanu morning

DAVID KIRKBY

there is the storekeeper and there the store he keeps where the green paint peels from the warm tin walls and all the people seem to come at once on cheque day so that all such days seem the same and the dusty doors grate as they slide and open again to the waiting land which sifts inside in a brown tide borne on the hot desert breeze condensing on shelves and tins and packets and jars and all the things that the store truck brings each week like biscuits and bread and corned beef tins and cheap clothes expensive bullets and chinese plastic toys and processed cheese and sugar for all the diabetics and salt for the kidneys and tinned meat laced with liquescent fat for all the ripening heart attacks and coca cola for the children who chase each other round and round the empty pallet stacks out the back where the leather dogs sleep in the sun and the toyotas go and they come and the kardiya argue about who's to blame and the old women sit in the shade with things like tea cosies on their heads but without any shame and watch the kids and draw patterns in the dust with their digging sticks while the young second wives feed fat babies because they must on plump and sun warmed breasts with the flies crawling round the babies eyes and ears and the pus from infections dripping like tears and the young men wondering where they will go hunting next when the motor car is fixed and the policeman they don't like has given up his tricks and gone into town where he belongs and the old men can sing their songs in peace at the business camp with the young fellas who will be men soon if the business men come up from Yuendumu when the land council meeting ends if the rains don't come and the sun and the sun and the sun just keeps shining on us all