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Archaeology and Indigenous Sovereignty: An Experiential Perspective on Producing Indigenous Archaeological Research

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples around the world have a deeply contentious relationship with the discipline of archaeology. This is due to colonial notions of perceived European supremacy that position Indigenous people at the periphery of research regarding their own cultures. In the early days of archaeology in Australia, Indigenous peoples and places were dismissed or ignored, except to record the remnants of a 'dying culture'. This article draws on the history of Australian archaeology and, through critical reflection of my own experiences producing archaeological research as a sovereign Aboriginal man, proposes a critical re-evaluation of archaeological theory and method and its ties to colonial epistemology and ontology.

Keywords

Archaeology, sovereignty, Indigenist research, decolonisation, epistemology

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Introduction

It is accepted that Indigenous peoples are the most researched people on earth, with Māori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith stating that the word 'research' is "probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary" (2012, p. 1). Research on and about Indigenous peoples forms an active component of ongoing colonisation, and this is particularly evident in social science disciplines, including archaeology. As a discipline that emerged out of the broader field of anthropology, archaeology must reflect on the racialised undertones and notions of coloniality at the foundation of its theory and practice, observable in both its historical and continuing production of research.

As an Aboriginal scholar, with familial and cultural ties to the south-eastern coast of New South Wales, I began my tertiary education in 2015 at Macquarie University, in Dharug Country. I chose to study history, and by the completion of my Bachelor of Arts degree in 2018 I had shifted my focus from the broader discipline of history to a more localised interest in Indigenous histories, and how archaeology fits into the long traditions of Indigenous stories, histories, and knowledges in so-called Australia. In late 2020, I completed my Master of Research Degree in the Department of Indigenous Studies, with a thesis entitled *An Archaeologist in Western New South Wales: An Indigenist Critique of Frederick McCarthy's Rock Art Research at Mount Grenfell*.¹ Produced out of the Department of Indigenous Studies, this thesis allowed me to traverse my own experiences as an Aboriginal scholar, and my undergraduate training as an historian and archaeologist.

The following discussion reflects my experience of producing this thesis. I draw together the history of Australian archaeology with the current trend of decolonial practices in the discipline and contextualise this within broader trends of Indigenous research practices to propose a critical re-evaluation of archaeological theory and method to centre Indigenous archaeological sovereignty.

Locating the 'Indigenous' in Indigenous archaeology

Despite the ongoing contentious relationship between Indigenous peoples and archaeologists, Indigenous peoples have never been passive bystanders to archaeology or archaeological research (Spriggs, 2020). While broad narratives suggest archaeological investigation and research is a predominantly a White endeavour, conducted by those with appropriate university education (Griffiths, 2017, 2018), there is a tradition of Indigenous involvement in archaeological research on the Australian continent from at least the 1830s (Lang, 1830; for discussion see: Spriggs, 2020, p. 9). However, it is often difficult to locate Indigenous peoples, communities, voices, and presences (the 'Indigenous') in the broader discipline of Indigenous archaeology.

The last two decades of research demonstrate an increasing number of archaeologists, particularly in settler-colonial nations such as Australia, the United States, and Canada, seeking to collaborate with Indigenous peoples, groups, and communities (Agbe-Davies, 2010; Atalay, 2012; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al., 2010; Conkey, 2005; Lyons, 2013; McDavid, 2002; Nicholas & Andrews, 1997; Watkins, 2000; Wylie, 2015). Such collaborative archaeologies are often categorised under the broader term 'Indigenous archaeology', which is itself a response to the positioning of Indigenous peoples as the

¹ Referred to henceforth as *An Archaeologist in Western New South Wales*.

subject or object of study, rather than as active participants. Along with collaborative practices, Indigenous archaeology is formed, in part, by the emergence of decolonial thinking in archaeology, which aims to shift the knowledges and concerns of Indigenous communities from the periphery to the centre of archaeological research (C. Wilson & Wiltshire, 2019). Indigenous archaeology therefore seeks to privilege Indigenous philosophies, epistemologies, interests, agendas, and concerns, to challenge and transform archaeological research, and reconceptualise the way we look at the discipline (Atalay, 2007; C. Smith & Wobst, 2005; Watkins, 2000).

In many ways, Indigenous archaeology is a direct response to the colonialist underpinnings of research by non-Indigenous peoples found in the roots of many social science disciplines, including archaeology. In its foundations, archaeology is informed by race theories and unilinear frameworks that situate humans in a hierarchy of civilisation spanning 'savagery', 'barbarism', and then 'civilisation' (McNiven & Russell, 2005; Scarre, 2013). These race theories allowed early European researchers to develop and maintain their beliefs that Australia's Indigenous peoples were less evolved than the European colonisers, or that Indigenous peoples constituted what Europeans once were. This ontological positioning of Indigenous peoples gave legitimacy to deeply invasive scientific exploration of their bodies, including 'bodysnatching' or the collecting of Indigenous peoples' remains for scientific investigation or displaying in museums and galleries (Fforde & Hubert, 2006; Kühnast, 2012; Turnbull, 1991). This narrative and the resulting justification of invasive exploration of Indigenous peoples in the name of 'research', persisted in Australian consciousness into the 20th century (Mulvaney & Kamminga, 1999; see also: L. T. Smith, 2012). Ideologies regarding the 'extinction' of 'traditional' Aboriginal peoples remained prevalent during and after the 1967 Referendum – the referendum that altered the Australian Constitution to include Indigenous peoples in the national census and give the federal government power to make laws for Indigenous people. As a result of this positioning – both within academic research and broader Australian society – the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in archaeological research about Indigenous ancestral sites was not considered necessary, as it was assumed descendent communities would add little value or knowledge to achievable outcomes.

As Colwell-Chanthanphon et al. argue, Indigenous archaeology is "fundamentally about altering the field's political economy and intellectual breadth" to allow for the incorporation of Indigenous "values, ideas, expressions, and experiences" (2010, p. 324). This has both practical and political effects in that it alters power relations among scientists and expands the volume and accuracy of available Indigenous data (Atalay, 2006, 2012; Harris, 2016; Nicholas & Bannister, 2016). Indeed, the trend towards decolonised practices and collaborative forms of archaeology has seen more non-Indigenous researchers embrace 'traditional knowledges' such as oral histories, creation stories, prayers, dances, and songs as valuable evidence (Colwell-Chanthanphon et al., 2010; Lelièvre et al., 2020). A significant part of archaeological research conducted on the Australian continent therefore relies on the knowledges provided by Indigenous community members to inform research design, data collection, results, and interpretations (Bruchac, 2014; Stump, 2013). However, these knowledges are not always contextualised within the local epistemologies and ontologies of the communities they come from and belong to, and are instead funnelled through the perspective of the non-Indigenous researcher in an act of epistemological Whiteness.

The relationship between knowledge and Whiteness is specifically addressed by Moreton-Robinson (2004) who argues that Indigenous people are rarely represented as the 'knowers'. That is, while White and non-Indigenous academics have produced knowledge about Indigenous people, "their way of knowing is never thought of by White people as being racialised, despite Whiteness being exercised epistemologically" (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, p. 75). Whiteness here is seen as, and defines itself as, the norm in the Western world. It is fundamental to Western epistemology and is the lens through which most Western scholars construct an understanding of the world. According to this paradigm, Whiteness and all facets of the White lived experience are prioritised over other knowledges or worldviews – either consciously or unconsciously – or even monopolised. Within this framework, although the reasons for diminishing or excluding Indigenous knowledges may be many and varied, among the principle motivations or justifications is the concept of knowledge 'quality' – both determined within and perpetuated by hegemonic academic structures. To assume, as many archaeologists and researchers have in the past, and in some cases, continue to, that Indigenous people cannot add value to research because their knowledges and ways of knowing, doing, and being do not align with the standards and rigor of academic research is, as Moreton-Robinson describes, "the limits of knowing and the epistemology of those who profess to know" (2004, p. 75). This draws from the questions raised by Watson:

Anthropologists in their hunting and gathering for the authentic native construct identities and favoured 'informants'. [They distinguish] some of [their] informants as knowing more than others...[but] are we left to assume that anthropologists and historians have recorded all there is to know? How do they 'know' that some people know more than others? (2002, pp. 12–13).

This highlights the biggest issue in locating the 'Indigenous' in Indigenous archaeology. When Indigenous peoples are not considered the 'knowers' in archaeological research, or their knowledge is disengaged from local contexts for the benefit of non-Indigenous or outsider contexts, the theorised re-centring of Indigenous knowledges, values, and perspectives is impossible.

There is significant difficulty in reconciling Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges in the Academy, and the insertion of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into established Western paradigms may not always be effective. While including Indigenous cultures, protocols and practices in research processes and adapting methodological approaches can bring some benefit, the problem lies with removing these tools from their underlying colonialist beliefs (S. Wilson, 2008). Collaborative archaeology and decolonial practices, are largely methodological shifts. They rely on the inclusion of Indigenous research methodologies established by Indigenous scholars (see for example: Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Chilisa, 2011; L. T. Smith, 2012). However methodological changes to a discipline whose practice is deeply rooted in established colonialist and empirical beliefs can only go so far. If we wish to locate the 'Indigenous' in Indigenous archaeology, it is clear that much more needs to be done.

Producing An Archaeologist in Western New South Wales

The version of my Master of Research thesis submitted for external examination in October 2020 was adapted from a previous research proposal for a fieldwork-based project centred on the merging of traditional knowledges with archaeology through a

collaborative, community-based 3D-scanning and photogrammetry project of the Mount Grenfell Historical Site with the Ngiyampaa-Wangaaypuwan community. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting social-distancing laws, fieldwork was rendered impossible, and the project was adapted to an Indigenist critique of existing archaeological scholarship regarding the Mount Grenfell site. Both projects have primary supervision within the Department of Indigenous Studies and associate supervision within the Department of History and Archaeology. This was a conscious choice, to facilitate intentional navigation of the space between Indigenous communities and archaeology through a culturally conscious and interdisciplinary lens rather than a colonially dominated one. It further allowed for a more prominent positioning of my own Yuin epistemology in my research, through which I was able to navigate the difficult task of establishing an effective contact point between the two disciplines and balance the two ways of knowing, being, and doing.

The idea of merging the disciplines of archaeology and Indigenous Studies to better address the issues faced in Indigenous archaeology is not new (Lelièvre et al., 2020; Nakata & David, 2016), though opinions on how to approach the topic vary. As a discipline, Indigenous Studies is articulated by Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata as the “study of how we have been studied, circumscribed, represented, and how this knowledge of us is limited in its ability to understand us” (2006, p. 272). Programs of Indigenous Studies are generally taught and managed by Indigenous academics (Nakata et al., 2012). Courses, units, and topics included in broader Indigenous Studies programs will therefore necessarily vary depending on the specialties of those academics recruited to teach them. However, all Indigenous Studies programs engage in the politics of knowledge production, and the discipline acts as a site of contestation against the role of other disciplines in the subjugation of Indigenous communities, groups, and individuals.

As an explicitly interdisciplinary discipline (Charles et al., 2016; Rhea & Russell, 2012), Indigenous Studies stands as an excellent point of contact through which the rich variety of Indigenous histories and knowledges can be respectfully, contextually, and completely brought into archaeological conversations. The problem lies, however, in where exactly this point of contact is made, and what each discipline is bringing to the metaphorical table. Within my own research, I drew principally from Narungga/Kaurna/Ngarrindjeri scholar Lester-Irabinna Rigney’s (1999, 2006) Indigenist critique and Indigenist research methodology, and the work of Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2004, 2015) regarding knowledge production and racialisation.

My approach was, and is, closely aligned with Nakata and David’s (2016) work, which proposes the theorizing of Indigenous standpoints at the cultural interface (Nakata, 1998, 2002, 2007) as a means of creating more possibilities and opportunities for critical engagement from all sides. The cultural interface is a space that exists at the intersection of Western and Indigenous knowledge systems, and is a site of negotiation, resistance, and interaction (Carlson, 2016). By its inherent nature as a bridge between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, doing, and being, Indigenous archaeology and the multitude of considerations that comes with it, is situated at the cultural interface. For me, this was the most logical way to approach my research, as while there is a recognised difference in systems of knowledge it is “not productive to collapse into an intellectual malaise of epistemic indifference” (Nakata & David, 2016, p. 440).

Rather, both sides need to meet in the “unfamiliar, decolonised but ‘curiously; shared ground” (Nakata & David, 2016, p. 441) to *create* opportunities out of the different knowledge practices.

The importance of creating opportunities drawing from both sides of the epistemic divide cannot be understated. In producing *An Archaeologist in Western New South Wales*, it was important to me to not just bring Indigenous voices, presences, values, and knowledges into archaeological discussion, but to fully incorporate them into the fundamental practices of archaeology. The cultural interface acts as a necessary starting point in negotiating the point of contact and balance of knowledges; however, it quickly became apparent that when this is transferred to archaeological praxis there is a tendency by non-Indigenous researchers to rely on purely methodological changes rather than larger paradigm shifts. As previously discussed in this paper, incorporating Indigenous methodologies can only go so far, and reliance on the standpoint of Indigenous community members or researchers does not — and should not — always translate to a balance of knowledges. As Wilson and Wiltshire (2019) point out, collaborating with Indigenous communities does not necessarily result in decolonised archaeological practice. Indigenous researchers will always bring an Indigenous standpoint to the table, as they walk through the world from their own individual standpoints, which is inherently an Indigenous one. There is, however, much more these community members and scholars can bring to a research project, and much more archaeologists can do to ensure they are not relying on Indigenous people to decolonise archaeology.

This formed the crux of the problem in producing *An Archaeologist in Western New South Wales*: how do we address the inequalities faced in these situations? How can I avoid falling into the same trap as I produce this research? By transiting both disciplines, I had hoped to find a neat balance in my work but quickly realised that was not feasible. This is partially due to the fact no research can ever be neatly balanced but also because being Aboriginal in the academy is never neat and tidy, regardless of where you sit intellectually or whether those you work with are Indigenous or non-Indigenous. This is not to say that I was unprepared going into Higher Degree Research; I was confident that I could complete the task required of me, and I was lucky enough to have the guidance and mentorship of two excellent scholars who stood on either side of the divide I was attempting to bridge. I was also fortunate in that I also had a broader system of support from those inside and outside of the academy. However, the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the required cancellation of fieldwork and face-to-face interaction with community groups meant that, at times, it felt as though I was part of the very problem I was trying to address. It is, then, a bit poetic that an Elder of mine gave me an answer I did not at the time realise I was seeking. In a moment when I was being very candid about my feelings, my Uncle said to me, in the roundabout way that uncles do:

...you're sovereign of this land. This land is you. All the bits and pieces that them fellas are picking up and looking at and digging in belong to you and me and our mob. Or they belong to that mob or this mob or whichever mob. But it don't matter what them white fellas say about it all because the ancestors and the knowledges will always be truth. Your sovereignty with the land will always guide you so you just need to be listening to that and paying attention to what it's telling you.

Enacting Archaeological Sovereignty

Archaeology exists for the present but an archaeological site is a history recovered within which memory/ies and tradition/s survive. It has the innate ability to transform our understanding of society and human existence in the past, present, and future. It is important to remember that archaeological sites are only classified as such by archaeologists, and classification according to these terms is a colonial practice in and of itself. Before, during, and after classification, sites of archaeological importance due to Indigenous cultural heritage remain sites of continued importance for those groups to whom the heritage pertains. As some of the world's oldest, continuing cultures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain a connection to Country. This connection includes knowledges and protocols involving many ancestral sites that are of interest to archaeologists and anthropologists. It is necessary, then, to take into account the ongoing sovereignty Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain over ourselves, our cultures, and our Countries.

Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person carries sovereignty within themselves (Brady, 2020), though sovereignty as a concept is much harder to define. Often, sovereignty will mean different things to different people, and definitions may change depending on specific or immediate contexts. In academic literature, Indigenous sovereignty is commonly explored within the confines of legislation, policy, and history, and is often misunderstood when explored outside of these contexts (Bunda, 2020). This literature deliberately avoids addressing misconceptions surrounding Indigenous sovereignty, which serves only to preserve the status quo of Australian law and society and allows for the continued justification of White supremacy (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Sovereignty was never ceded, however the violent appropriation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands by the British Empire, and the systematic dispossession of our cultures and peoples, has resulted in the denial of this sovereignty. Within the context of this research, I draw on Indigenous sovereignty as an embodied experience. Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes:

Our sovereignty is embodied, it is ontological (our being) and epistemological (our way of knowing), and it is grounded within complex relations derived from the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and land. In this sense, our sovereignty is carried by the body (2020, p. 2).

Koori scholar Wendy Brady elaborates on this by exploring duality in the experience of sovereign identities:

Aboriginal people still retain an identity that is individual and communal—which is not schizophrenic, but rather a duality of being. Within that duality, there is a sense and manifestations of being of a sovereign nation, no matter how depleted or damaged, and carrying the sense of belonging to that sovereign nation despite the historical and current efforts of the dominant culture (2020, p. 141).

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we carry the sovereignty of our Nations and Communities, but we also carry sovereignty for ourselves as individuals. Further, as embodied sovereign subjects, we contribute to current debates by challenging the dominant perspectives of Indigenous sovereignty.

I also take the position that sovereignty and self-determination are linked in this context. I employ the definition of 'self-determination' used by Sami scholar Jalena Porsanger who states that Indigenous people have the right to self-determination,

...not only from a political or economical point of view, but also with respect to research...For indigenous peoples, this means being able to make decisions about the research agenda and methodologies for themselves without any outside influence (2004, p. 108).

In archaeology, there is a denial of this sovereignty, as knowledges, histories, and voices are often misappropriated or utilised for the benefit of Western academic research. I argue here that Australian archaeology, especially when involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and places, needs to move towards the practice of enacting sovereignty through self-determination. Archaeology is a transformative practice, therefore it can – and *should* – transform the way the discipline interacts with and serves Indigenous peoples. There is room in the discipline to enact Indigenous sovereignty and promote cultural healing in the way archaeologists and Indigenous communities interact at ancestral sites.

What this looks like in practice will greatly differ depending on the research being conducted, the aims and hypotheses of that research, the people(s) involved in the research, and the community on whose Country the site is situated. It is clear, however, that we cannot rely on solely community-based participatory practices to enact this change. While community-based practices can be effective (Koolmatrre, 2018; Roberts, 2020; C. Smith et al., 2020), and community archaeology practices in Australia are generally more explicitly articulated than in other parts of the world (Marshall, 2002), there are still challenges (C. Smith et al., 2019). Community-based participatory research is criticised due to the way such practices are generally problem-focussed (Chilisa, 2011). They often identify unmet needs and deficiencies and, in some cases, result in the perception of communities as places with problems that can only be corrected with outsider assistance. While there are ways around this issue, including appreciative inquiry (Ludema et al., 2006; Tuck, 2009), this highlights the issues with a purely methodological change-based approach. To enact archaeological sovereignty – we require epistemological and ontological changes, not only methodological ones.

For archaeology with Indigenous communities to be effective and beneficial in the long term, archaeologists need to enact Indigenous sovereignty in research. Part of this involves relationship building and accountability between Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators. There is, for example, significant difference between consulting with Indigenous peoples and actively listening to community members. It is not enough to simply confer or consult with Indigenous peoples – as researchers, we have the responsibility to *actively listen*. This entails not only listening to the wishes, instructions, and protocols of Elders, Traditional Owners, and Community members, but also ensuring there is follow-through on any instructions and reciprocity in the research process. Outcomes of research must include mutual benefit to both researcher and Community, and what constitutes a beneficial outcome cannot be known without first discussing this with the Community. Without active listening, consultation means nothing.

Smith et al. write that “For non-Indigenous archaeologists, the challenge lies in shifting from working *with* Indigenous peoples to working *for* Indigenous peoples. How we do this is a matter for each individual to decide” (2019, p. 559), highlighting the specific challenge of the differing epistemological and ontological positioning of Indigenous peoples and the archaeological discipline. Smith et al.’s statement also highlights the need for questioning whether the research is necessary. Does the Community need the research, or is it being done to satisfy the curiosities and currencies of non-Indigenous institutions? Has the request for research come from Traditional Owners, or did the institution instigate the consultation? This is not to say that a relationship and research collaboration instigated by a non-Indigenous institution is inherently harmful. For such research to work within the space of ensuring self-determination and Indigenous sovereignty within and over research practice, we as archaeologists need to question why and for what purpose the research is being done in the first place. As researchers, we are being held accountable to the Community we are working with, and we need to employ reflexivity during our research, ensuring that it is benefitting the Community and not only ourselves. This applies to all researchers regardless of Indigeneity.

Conclusion

The narratives surrounding archaeology in Australia are predominantly situated within the epistemologies and ontologies of the Western world, and traditionally operate to serve and reinforce Western interests and ideologies. As a result, Western archaeology has historically excluded the vast array of knowledges, voices, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples when considering the significance of Indigenous ancestral sites. While decolonisation practices from the 1990s onwards have aimed to shift the knowledges and concerns of Indigenous communities and peoples from the periphery to the centre and methodological approaches emphasise collaboration between Indigenous communities and archaeologists, it remains difficult to locate the ‘Indigenous’ in Indigenous archaeology. There is, therefore, an explicit need to address the dichotomies that lie at the heart of the Western archaeological practice.

Indigenous archaeology exists at the cultural interface. As such, there is value in bringing together practices of archaeology and Indigenous Studies in research regarding Australian ancestral sites. In recognising the issues that arise when combining Indigenous and Western epistemologies and ontologies, especially the racialisation of knowledge production and the inherent Whiteness of the academy, it is important to find a balance and point of contact. Through reflecting on my own experience of bringing archaeology together with Indigenous Studies, I argue that the necessary point of contact resides with the fundamental notion of Indigenous sovereignty through self-determination. What this sovereignty looks like in archaeological praxis will necessarily differ depending on specific contexts. However it will require the discipline of archaeology to challenge the configuration of its own past, and move beyond Western epistemological and ontological privilege to engage fully with Indigenous peoples. As a discipline at the interface of a series of complex, holistic, and deep-time stories, knowledges and histories, archaeology is in a unique position to prioritise the agency, sovereignty and benefits of the Indigenous communities researchers rely upon for our interpretations. These actions also serve to open doors for community healing and cultural freedom, and thereby encompass the potential for truly transformative praxis in archaeological research.

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