Guest Editor’s Remarks

Decolonizing Archaeology

SONYA ATALAY

THE WISDOM OF CHICKENS

This collection of articles came about as the result of the professional relationships and friendships among a group of archaeologists who collectively call themselves the “Closet Chickens.” The organization known as the Closet Chickens formally came into existence after extended e-mail discussions among a group of Native American archaeologists who had participated in a conference at Dartmouth College in 2001. The conference was titled “On the Threshold: Native American Archaeologist Relations in the Twenty-first Century,” and it brought together a small group of Indigenous archaeologists from around the United States who were able to share their ideas and perspectives about being Native American archaeologists. The conversation started at this conference was continued via e-mail and resulted in the decision to maintain discussions as a more formal group.

In early e-mail correspondence a discussion arose over what to name the group. One participant suggested the name “Funky Chickens,” while another scholar suggested including the word “grease” in memory of the movie they were watching while having that original discussion at Dartmouth. Soon the naming suggestions included the word “closet,” after one member rejected another’s offer of a closet in her small, crowded apartment for temporary lodging. The group was officially titled the Closet Chickens, and members soon began to find appropriate chicken-related names for each other, including Greasy Chicken, Chicken Noodle, Chicken Strips, and Chicken—a-la-Queen.

As the group’s informal webpage notes: “One of the group’s major goals is to ensure that there are too many Native American archaeolo-
gists to fit into any closet.” Additional members have been added to the Closet Chickens group, which now includes Native American and First Nations archaeologists and supporters. At recent archaeology and anthropology professional conferences, over a number of networking dinners and friendly coffee breaks, members of the group have developed a “secret” Chicken handshake, have been known to sing a Chicken song, and there are even plans to perform the Chicken Dance each year at the Society for American Archaeology professional meetings.

Amidst the joking and silliness of the Closet Chickens’ tales is a profound story of strength and perseverance. As have First Nations and other Indigenous groups globally, Native Americans in this country have faced, as part of the colonial process, the theft, appropriation, and misrepresentation of our history, cultural heritage, and intellectual and cultural property. Even the bodies of our ancestors were not sacred in this assault. As David Hurst Thomas and others have demonstrated so powerfully, the rise of archaeology played an intricate part in the colonization process, and the results of this conflict remain with us to this day.1 However, Native people in North America are not simply helpless victims of colonization; they are people who have actively found ways to work against Western and colonial practices to retain aspects of their traditional knowledge and lifeways. In an effort to regain control of their cultural resources, ancestral remains, and heritage, Indigenous people around the globe have played an active role in creating positive change in the field of archaeology. Scholars and activists have critiqued the discipline and practices of archaeology and anthropology—for example, they have protested such practices as displaying open burials for tourism and the display of human remains and sacred objects in museums. They have also worked with archaeologists and museum professionals to develop NAGPRA, important legislation that has resulted in the reburial and repatriation of thousands of our ancestors and sacred objects.2

In addition to such community activism and academic scholarship focused on making changes in the practice of archaeology from outside the discipline, Indigenous people have also chosen to work actively to improve the discipline of archaeology by advancing change from the inside, as professional archaeologists, excavation monitors, scholars working in tribal or national museums, and academic archaeologists. Each of the Closet Chickens has taken on this charge, and they face the difficult task of learning to facilitate change in a way that is both productive and
As a member of the Closet Chickens myself, I can speak from firsthand experience to the challenges and struggles that this opportunity presents on a regular basis. It is the humor, friendship, solidarity, and support such as that apparent in the Closet Chickens origins story that provides the professional strength and inspiration necessary to make great and passionate strides toward decolonizing the discipline of archaeology, which has such a strong colonial history.

INDIGENOUS ARCHAEOLOGY

As Native American, First Nations, and other Indigenous peoples globally voiced critiques and opposition to the practices of archaeologists and anthropologists who carried out excavation on tribal lands and sacred sites; analyzed, stored, and displayed ancestral remains and sacred objects in museums; and presumed to be the stewards of Indigenous pasts, a small handful of scholars began to listen and recognize the inherent colonial nature of archaeological methods and theories. They began exploring these critiques and asking how archaeologists might address them. One clear answer was to build positive relationships and mutual respect and understanding between archaeologists and Indigenous communities through consultation and collaboration. At various times, in a range of countries around the globe, various forms of consultation and collaboration of archaeologists with Indigenous people became both legally and ethically mandated. These legislative and academic acts were the beginning steps toward building an Indigenous archaeology. At the same time, a small number of Indigenous people around the globe began to receive training in archaeology—initially many did so in response to their community’s need for a person knowledgeable in archaeological practice who could effectively consult with archaeologists as new legislation required.

The presence of Indigenous people, as well as their perspective and voice on topics of archaeology, history, heritage, and cultural resource management within academic and educational settings, further helped to reinforce the idea that archaeology could benefit from the incorporation of Indigenous concepts about the past, and their connection and importance in the present. Through these interactions, archaeologists had the opportunity to observe that, for many Indigenous people, the preservation and protection of cultural resources had long been an im-
portant part of traditional practice and furthermore that archaeologists and Indigenous people had in common a number of shared goals. As a result, archaeologists from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds began talking and writing about a new form of archaeological practice, something that was not only possible but also necessary: an Indigenous archaeology.

DECOLONIZING PRACTICES

The methods and practices of Indigenous archaeology are in the process of being formed and articulated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, activists, and community members around the world. Efforts to move the field toward a decolonizing practice is one of Indigenous archeology’s critical endeavors. Thus when soliciting articles for this issue, I asked each contributor to discuss the role of decolonization in their work and the ways in which they envision their scholarship and research as part of a decolonizing agenda. While each of the articles is based upon and informed by archaeological research methods, theories, and practices and addresses topics, issues, and concerns that are central to various aspects of mainstream archaeological practice, in both Western and non-Western settings, each also draws on wider decolonization and Indigenous scholarship from the humanities and social science disciplines.

The research included in this issue addresses a range of topics, including the role of Indigenous archaeology in a wider decolonizing practice (Atalay); archaeological field work and field schools (Smith and Jackson, Nicholas, Gonzalez et al); consultation and collaboration (Smith and Jackson, Nicholas, Gonzalez et al, Lippert, Martinez); archaeological training and education (Nicholas, Two-Bears); ethnohistorical research in archaeology (Dartt-Newton and Erlandson); archaeology in relation to museum contexts (Lippert, Hoobler); and issues of racism and racialism in archaeology (Echo-Hawk and Zimmerman). Each article presents examples of the ways in which Indigenous archaeology scholars and professionals are using methods, theories, and practices in ways that are informed by or in agreement with various Indigenous epistemologies about archaeology, history, heritage, and the interpretations of the past.

Sonya Atalay’s article, “Indigenous Archaeology as Decolonizing Practice,” provides a general overview of the practices of Indigenous archaeo-
ogy. She examines the ethics involved in archaeological practice and ways in which this relates to the audience of research and issues of heritage. In her view, Indigenous archaeology is not only about research done on Native lands by Native people for Native communities, but rather, she argues, Indigenous archaeology has implications for changes that must take place in the mainstream of archaeological practice if the discipline is to move forward and become a useful tool for the recovery of Indigenous traditions in the twenty-first century and beyond. Atalay outlines the themes of Indigenous archaeology and addresses the ways in which these concepts can be applied to local communities, descendant groups, and stakeholders globally, including applications for areas outside of an Indigenous land base.

In another example of research outside of North America, Claire Smith and Gary Jackson's article, “Decolonizing Indigenous Archaeology: Developments from Down Under,” outlines some key points of interest in the changing practice of archaeology in Australia. Smith and Jackson discuss clearly the colonial nature of archaeological practice in general and provide compelling research and examples for efforts made to decolonize the discipline. Their research touches on many of the themes and topics that other papers in this issue deal with individually, including field work practices and permissions, collaborative research efforts with Indigenous people, museums and representation, dissemination of research results, and the benefits of research for communities.

Smith and Jackson's research and observations gained from working with Aboriginal Australians holds applicability for Indigenous archaeology more broadly, and particularly for efforts to decolonize the discipline of archaeology. This is a point made by the authors in their closing discussion, in which they compare the situation of Indigenous people in Australia and North American with regard to control of their own heritage and the mainstream practice of archaeology in both locations. Their article points toward several positive solutions and directions that might work toward decolonization, including funding strategies, improved standards of ethics, and concern for the benefits and dissemination of research, all of which will play a critical role in bringing about a practice that is truly socially just and ethical in its goals, methods, and approach.

With similar concerns of collaboration and self-determination in mind, George P. Nicholas discusses his experience of over a decade as the
director of the Simon Fraser University-Secwepemc Education Institute of Archaeology in the province of British Columbia, Canada. In the article “Decolonizing the Archaeological Landscape: The Practice and Politics of Archaeology in British Columbia,” Nicholas examines the ways that archaeological landscape research is enhanced by collaboration with Indigenous people. He illustrates the processes in which First Nations people interact with and experience the land in ways that are profoundly different than those of westerners and how this affects predictive models for locating sites and thus the preservation of critical archaeological knowledge. His research provides several examples of the benefits that Indigenous people have found in utilizing archaeological approaches for land claims and reclaiming knowledge about traditional land use.

As in Smith and Jackson’s article and the approach put forth by Atalay, Nicholas also describes the ways in which Western and non-Western approaches to the past, heritage, and archaeology can be complementary.

In efforts of decolonization, education plays a critical role. Not only must we take on the task of deconstruction, critique of colonial practices and knowledge systems, and modeling improved practices and approaches for the future, but we must also work diligently to educate students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, on these practices in order to be certain that such forms of knowledge and approaches become a standard part of archaeological research designs, method, and theory. Therefore, it is critical that we also focus on forms of archaeological education—in both the classroom and in the field. Nicholas discusses his experience as director of a tribal archaeology program and in his article demonstrates the importance of building educational and training programs with self-determination in mind. Davina R. Two Bears addresses the issue of education also, but from the point of view of a tribal archaeology program. Her article, “Navajo Archaeologist Is Not an Oxymoron: A Tribal Archeologist’s Experience,” illustrates the importance of traditional knowledge systems and world views (in this case Navajo practices) in relation to cultural resources and history. Two Bears outlines the need for Navajo trained archaeologists who can approach archaeology with a culturally sensitive view, particularly when involved in fieldwork or working with community members. She makes clear the importance of building and supporting such a tribally specific field school, training, and education program as part of a decolonizing model of archaeological education and practice.
Sara L. Gonzalez, Darren Modzelewski, Lee M. Panich, and Tsim D. Schneider also address the subject of education, but they focus on field school training, the primary way in which new archaeologists gain first hand experience of conducting research and fieldwork. In their article, “Archaeology for the Seventh Generation,” Gonzalez, Modzelewski, Panich, and Schneider put forward a model for a collaborative field school and research project, one that benefits both the local Native community—in this case the Kashaya Pomo—and the archaeology students who attend the field school. Their article presents both the positive aspects of a collaborative field school as well as the challenges that may be faced. One comes away from this article with a view to how all archaeologists might be field trained in the future and the importance of not only respecting Indigenous and local traditions but also incorporating those into the daily lived experiences and practices of researchers while in the field.

Deana Dartt-Newton and Jon M. Erlandson’s article, “Little Choice for the Chumash: Colonialism, Cattle, and Coercion in Mission Period California,” is a powerful testimony to the importance of ethnohistoric knowledge as invaluable data for archaeological interpretations. Their research on the mission period in California clearly demonstrates that effects of colonization were primary decision-making factors in Chumash people’s movement to the missions. The ethnohistoric data Dartt-Newton and Erlandson present shows that the Chumash had little choice other than to move to the missions; it also highlights the troubling and disastrous influence of Spanish agricultural production on traditional foodways. Rather than seeing the environmental changes that took place during the mission period as a primary force leading the Chumash to relocate in mission environments that were often incredibly hostile to Indigenous views and practices, Dartt-Newton and Erlandson argue that the Chumash had longstanding knowledge and experience with drought and other environmental factors and were equipped to handle them. However, the Chumash were not equipped to handle the powerful colonial force exerted on them by the mission system. Bringing this knowledge to the foreground and acknowledging ethnohistoric data as central for including Indigenous views in interpretations are both aspects of a decolonizing archaeology practice.

The importance of Indigenous knowledge systems and acknowledgement of non-Western worldviews in relation to material culture and
ancestral remains is a central point of Dorothy Lippert’s article, “Building a Bridge to Cross a Thousand Years.” Lippert uses Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia to relate the multiple meanings and views toward archaeological materials in a museum setting. She provides a powerful example of the ways in which consultation can be beneficial for the parties who have varying interests and approaches to the materials held in museums—both curators who see the objects as archaeological specimens that will lead to scientific knowledge and Native people who view the ancestral and cultural remains as part of their living heritage and history. Lippert offers a model and a view forward, a bridge by which mutual understanding and respect in museum practice and consultation might lead to more productive and equitable relationships.

Ellen Hoobler’s article, “‘To Take Their Heritage in Their Hands’: Indigenous Self-Representation and Decolonization in the Community Museums of Oaxaca, Mexico,” also focuses on museums, but rather than examining practices in a traditional museum setting, Hoobler presents research on the decolonizing movement toward self-representation and control over local community museums using a case study. Presenting a historical view of the community museum in Mexico, her analysis demonstrates the motivations and results of decolonizing one’s heritage. Hoobler’s work also looks toward the future, as she explores the routes that community museums in the region might take in the next decade.

Roger Echo-Hawk and Larry J. Zimmerman’s article, “Beyond Racism: Some Opinions about Racialism and American Archaeology,” examines the complex and often heated topic of race, racism, and racialism in American archaeology and the impacts these have had in both public and academic spheres. They provide historical context of the ways in which race has been, and continues to be, viewed in anthropological circles and by the public and media. Echo-Hawk and Zimmerman each examine the effects and outcomes this has had in the well-known case of the Ancient One/Kennewick Man, which was recently decided by the Ninth District superior court. Echo-Hawk and Zimmerman’s article presents the case of the Ancient One with a view to its implications for American origins and the right to claim indigeneity in North America. The article will leave its readers with a sense of the tremendous amount of work, research, and activism that remains to be done if we are to take seriously the cause of ending racism and moving toward a decolonized world.
Finally, Desireé Renée Martinez also examines the working relationships involving Indigenous people and archaeologists. Her article, “Overcoming Hindrances to Our Enduring Responsibility to the Ancestors: Protecting Traditional Cultural Places,” utilizes a social psychology perspective to examine and improve upon the communication practices between Indigenous people and archaeologists. Martinez makes it clear that when issues as critical as the protection of our ancestors are at stake, it is crucial that consultation and collaboration with Indigenous groups involve positive and productive ways of communication. Her research has important practical implications for future research planning and implementation not only in archaeological research but also, potentially, in other areas of decolonizing practice, as it reiterates the commanding role that both power relations and language can hold in Indigenous people’s interactions with scholars globally.

These articles are by no means a complete picture of all the efforts made by Indigenous archaeology scholars and activists to decolonize archaeology and move toward a more equitable and ethical practice in the twenty-first century and beyond. They are only a sampling of the work that has been done, both by leading scholars and thinkers in this area of research and by those newly entering the field of archaeology. While the work presented here may not be representative of the ideas and practices of the majority of mainstream archaeologists in the United States and other Western countries, it does demonstrate that things are certainly changing. We are in the process of moving beyond the anthropology that Vine Deloria Jr. and many others so aptly and powerfully critiqued toward an archaeology that recognizes its own colonial history and its effects on contemporary people worldwide—including Indigenous people, descendant communities, and a range of public and stakeholders globally. I’ve already begun to see many positive changes take place since I entered graduate school ten years ago, as questions of ethics and social justice become part of the education, vocabulary, and research designs of the next generation of archaeologists—a growing number of whom are now Indigenous people. Improvement and change are often excruciatingly slow, and a great deal of work and struggle remains. Yet in reading these articles I feel a strong sense of encouragement and hope for the changes we have witnessed and continue to bring about in the field of archaeology.
NOTES

1. See Thomas, Skull Wars. See also Mann, Native Americans; Mihesuah, Repatriation Reader; Riding-In, “Our Dead Are Never Forgotten.”


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