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Re-claiming and re-writing the past through indigenous voices and worldviews

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Abstract

Indigenous identities and links to homelands have been erased through colonial anthropological discussions; often invented by settler archaeologists, working as handmaidens to the state in colonized lands. In the Americas, the deep Indigenous past has been aggressively denied for over a century. Anthropologist's denial of the deep Indigenous past of the Americas, have cleaved Indigenous people's links to their homeland and created them as recent immigrants to the Americas, on a global scale of human history. Yet, Indigenous oral traditions of First People of the Americas tell a much different story of the past. In many oral traditions, Indigenous peoples say that they have been here forever, since time immemorial. In consideration of a group of first people whose distinct identities, culture, and traditions grew from their relationship to their homelands, it could be said they have been here forever. For Indigenous people forever may mean from their physical creation, or from the beginning of their cultural identities in a specific place. All people have an unalienable right to tell their history and their stories in their own voice and their own ways of knowing. I argue that in knowledge production of the Indigenous past there is a vast body of evidence, which archaeologists ignore a priori. Oral traditions of people's time and place on the land are historical accounts that come from firsthand knowledge and experience. In weaving oral traditions and archaeology, we create opportunities to gain a much richer and more informed view of the past.

Key words: *Indigenous, Archaeology, Rock Art, Petroglyphs, Oral Traditions, America's.*

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Resumen

Re-reclamar y re-escribir el pasado a través de voces indígenas y cosmovisión

Las identidades indígenas y los vínculos con sus centros de origen se han borrado a través de discusiones antropológicas coloniales; a menudo inventado por los arqueólogos, trabajando como empleadas al estado en tierras colonizadas. En las Américas, el gran pasado indígena ha sido agresivamente negado por más de un siglo. La negación por parte del antropólogo del profundo pasado indígena de las Américas, han cortado los vínculos de los pueblos indígenas con sus lugares de origen y los han transformado en recientes inmigrantes de las Américas, a escala mundial de la historia humana. Sin embargo, las tradiciones orales indígenas de los Primeros Pueblos de las Américas cuentan una historia muy diferente del pasado. En muchas tradiciones orales, los pueblos indígenas dicen que han estado aquí desde siempre, desde tiempos inmemoriales. Considerando un grupo de sus representantes cuyas diferentes identidades, cultura y tradiciones crecieron de su relación con sus tierras natales, se podría decir que han estado aquí para siempre. Para los pueblos indígenas el sentido de para siempre puede significar desde su creación física, o desde el principio de sus identidades culturales en un lugar específico. Todas las personas tienen un derecho inalienable a contar su historia y sus historias en sus propios términos y sus propias formas de conocimiento. Sostengo que en la producción de conocimiento del pasado indígena hay un vasto cuerpo de evidencia que los arqueólogos ignoran a priori. Las tradiciones orales del tiempo y el lugar de las personas en la tierra son relatos históricos que provienen del conocimiento y la experiencia de primera mano. Al relacionar tradiciones orales y arqueología, creamos oportunidades para obtener una visión mucho más rica e informada del pasado.

Palabras claves: *indígenas, Arqueología, arte prehistórico, petroglifos, tradiciones orales, América.*

The Indigenous past has traditionally been invented by settler archaeologists who are vested in, and working as handmaidens to the state in colonized lands. Thus, Indigenous identities and Indigenous peoples links to homelands have been erased across time and space .In the Americas, the deep Indigenous past has been aggressively denied for over a century.

> The problem is that constant efforts by governments, states, societies, and institutions to deny… have simultaneously denied our claims to humanity, to having a history, and to all sense of hope. To acquiesce is to loose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves (Smith, 1999, p. 4).

Anthropologist's denials of the deep Indigenous past of the Americas, h-9ave created them as recent immigrants to the Americas, on a global scale of human history. Yet, Indigenous oral traditions of First People of the Americas tell a much different story of the past. In many oral traditions, Indigenous peoples say that they have been here forever, since time immemorial. In consideration of a group of first people whose distinct identities, culture, and traditions grew from their relationship to their homelands, it could be said they have been here forever. For Indigenous people forever may mean from their physical creation, or from the beginning of their cultural identities in a specific place. All people have an unalienable right to tell their history and their stories in their own voice and their own ways of knowing. I argue that in knowledge production of the Indigenous past there is a vast body of evidence, which archaeologists ignore a priori.

According to Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal "there are benefits from or denied from relics of the past" (Gathercole and Lowenthal, 1990. p. 91). These benefits they argue, "…distinguish the few from the many, the rich from the poor, mainstream from minority and, male from female" (Gathercole and Lowenthal, 1990: 91). Benefits of control of the past in archaeology include the power to define the past and to create social memories that disempower and dehumanize colonized communities (Bilosi and Zimmerman, 1997, p. 13). In work to reclaim and re-humanizing their own histories, Indigenous scholars and communities incorporate legal and discursive praxis, which challenges long embedded oppressive tactics of colonization.

Numerous Indigenous communities have become active in re-claiming and protecting their ancestral and sacred spaces. Sacred and cultural landscapes and places remain an important part of the processes of healing and self-determination for contemporary Indigenous communities (Duran, 2006, p. 1; Julien *et al*., 2010, p. 163; Wiseman, 2005, p. 2).

Roger Echo- Hawk defined two major subdivisions of North American oral literature; oral history defined as verbal first hand memories, and oral traditions defined as firsthand observations passed down to others (Echo-Hawk, 2000, p. 270). Margaret Kovach (2009, p. 95) a Cree scholar discussed two forms of stories that hold mythical elements "creation and teaching stories and… personal narratives of place happenings and experience". Kovach further states that both forms of stories teach of good and bad consequences regarding ways of living. Indigenous oral traditions are collections of knowledge, repositories of history, science, genealogy, medicine, religion, astronomy, music, and dance (Stevenson, 2000). Attention to detail is an essential feature of oral traditions, stories are consistent across time as story tellers strive to remember details (Archambault, 2005). Kovach (2005, p. 95) discussing the scholarship of Edward Ahenakew (1995, p. 37) wrote that "It was the Elders' responsibility in ensuring a moral code and history of the tribe, and it was through storytelling that they fulfilled this

obligation". Traditional knowledge is derived from accumulated experiences and events repeated in stories which include accurate details wrapped in mythic highlighters of memory, they are both colorful and explanatory (Echo-Hawk, 2000, p. 273). The lived experiences of numerous communities are held in oral histories linked to mnemonic pegs, points of reference of place, space (Augustine, 2008, p. 2, Cruikshank, 2002, p. 362). The retelling of specific geological and environmental events is passed on to each successive generation. Roger Eco-Hawk (2000: 274) stated that oral traditions which contain historical information can reach back across 40,000 years. There are many oral traditions that tell of Pleistocene weather patterns, movements of sea ice, solar events, sea level changes, volcanic eruptions, Pleistocene species, and glacial lakes (Echo-Hawk, 2000, p. 273). Thus, there is a link between times and places, stories and cultural survival, links which have been denied and erased in American archaeology "The link between stories and cultural survival is clear. The life of the people is carried through rituals, ceremonies, and stories, which are continually attacked from the outside" (Shackleton, 2009).

Archaeologists most often treat Indigenous oral histories with skepticism. Oral traditions are systematically de-valued by Western science which promoted itself as the single speaker of science's truths (Echo-Hawk, 2000´p. 264; Harding, 2001 p. 51; Wiley, 2008, p. 80; Whiteley, 2002, p. 407). Western archaeology interprets the past through the material record which can be scientifically tested, counted, weighed, measured and categorized. Oral traditions are not always amenable to being counted or measured, but they can be archaeologically tested (Echo-Hawk, 2000). Oral traditions speak to a very distant past (Mayes, 2010, p. 139) and tell stories of extinct Pleistocene species (Mayor, 2000, p. 1; Echo-Hawk, 2000, p. 264; Wiley, 2008, p. 80). People have for thousands of years relied on their worldviews when making observations about their surroundings and events in everyday life, their observation and explanations passed on through oral histories are now called Traditional Knowledge (Wenzel, 1999). Oral Traditions and intergenerational memories are not distinct to any one population, they have sustained human survival throughout time (Wiley, 2008, p. 81). Knowledge of seasonal resource procurement, material sources, celestial bodies, and species habitats have been critical for human survival (Wiley, 2008, p. 81). Oral histories have played important roles in national and global communities.

> The oral-literary tradition is a cornerstone of every tribal society. It is the vehicle through which wisdom is passed from one generation to the next… It is responsible in large part for the education, entertainment, and inspiration of the community, and as such its study offers the opportunity, to seriously interested outsiders to experience new and provocative visions of reality (Dorris, 1979, p. 157).

Eldon Yellowhorn (2002 p. 16) discussed origin myths as a study of landscape, he argued that such a study "introduces the principals of geology, does not undermine science or mythology, but applying research methods to ancient tales modernizes the story". Yellowhorn (2002) states that he works to overcome stereotypes of mythology by "providing a practical guide for imagining the past by blending Blackfoot folklore with archaeological methods". Oral traditions and myths have been used by many societies on a global scale to make sense or every day realities, catastrophic events, environmental changes, and relationships (Whiteley, 2002, p. 407). Indigenous oral histories include stories of places on the land, and of all our relations, four legged, rooted, finned, and winged, acknowledging relationships, which exist between all life forms (Cajete, 2000, p. 86; Chilisa, 2012, p. 3; Battiste, 2007, p. 110; Kovach, 2009, p. 34).

> Archaeologists frequently say that the sites they excavate and the artifacts they recover can speak to us across the centuries.... In oral traditions, we can hear the echoes of the actual voices of the people who made those artifacts and who were the original owners of the skeletons. As researchers explore the contribution to the history of oral traditions in Africa, Australia, and the Americas, it has become increasingly difficult to ignore arguments that historical information has been preserved through verbal means for great lengths of time (Echo-Hawk, 2000, p. 285).

There are thousands of rock art (pictograph) and petroglyph sites in both North and South America. Many of the sites are linked to oral traditions of migrations, pilgrimages, ceremonies, cultural activities and education, and histories of important ancestors and events (Figures 1 and 2).

Archaeologists traditionally dismissed Indigenous people's oral traditions as unhistorical or entertaining myths (Krober, 1917; Lowie, 1917). During the nineteenth century policies of Indian disenfranchisement and removal were based on anthropologist's discussions that "dismissed folklore as savage musings" (Yellowhorn, 2002, p. 90). Yellowhorn (2002, p. 90) has argued that incontemporary times such practices continue under an agenda which "diminishes Indian legal rights by taking a narrow view of traditional narratives". Oral Traditions are attached to organic and inorganic elements and spoken in ways that infuse them with life and thus as living and visually remembered. They are infused with joy, fear, sadness, temperament, heartbeats, death, and morals. They are linked to daily survival, they are the life, the land, and heartbeat of a people, the lifeblood that binds across thousands of years and generations (LaDuke, 2002, p. 153).

Peter Whiteley (2002, p. 406) argued that archaeologists can maintain epistemological rigor and analytical capacity for new information through a middle ground which remains open to "legitimate oral tradition... as additional evidence". Whiteley (2002) further argued that an overdependence on any one

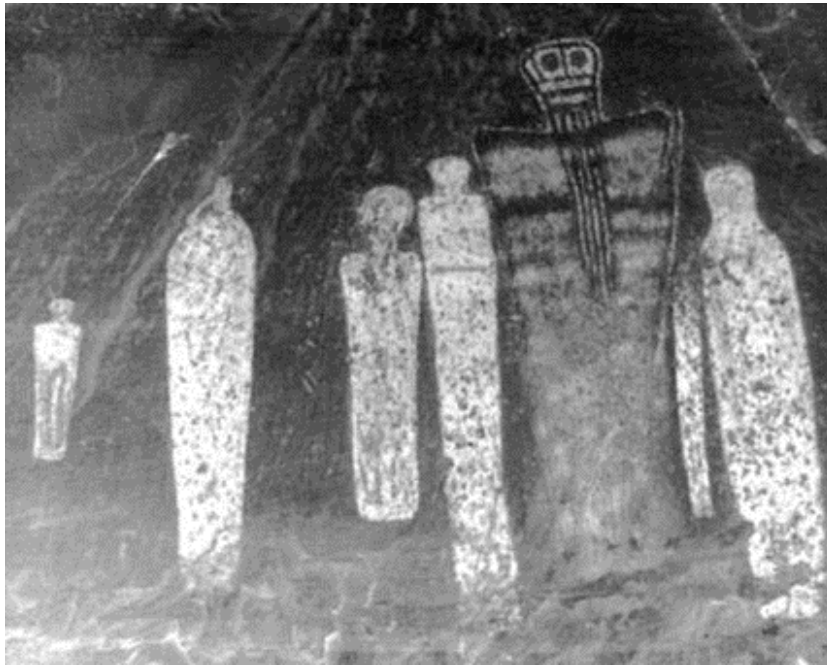

Figure 1. Pictograph from Utah, USA, from Gough, G. R. (2007).

Figure 2. Pictograph from Utah, USA, from Gough, G. R. (2007).

area of science risks neglecting evidence from others areas which have the potential to inform our understanding of the human past. Considerations of oral traditions as an initial step in archaeological practice, would be a path towards decolonizing the field and our minds.

A few scholars have recently begun to pay attention to oral traditions and linkages to historic events. Darby Stapp (2004) stated that; "The idea of archaeologists using oral histories as evidence about the past is slowly gaining acceptance… It is interesting that Native Americans were talking about a great flood in the Columbia Basin even before the geologists started talking about it (Stapp, 2004, p. 3).

In reading oral traditions in the English language scholars must be mindful of pitfalls in translations. English words, which have been used to interpret oral traditions often do not exist in Indigenous languages. Nature is an example of one of those words, in the Cree language there is no word that corresponds to nature (Preston, 1999, p. 39). In the Cree language there is a word for life, pimaatisiiwin, which includes animal persons and humans (Preston, 1999, p. 39).

> The Eastern Cree were traditionally working under the premise that all persons, including human, animal, spirit are part of an inter-relational network involving direct personal communication and response through action. As hunters, the Cree saw themselves not as dominant over animals, but as ethical and moral participants in a form of community between themselves, the animals, the environment, and the spirit persons who were responsible for the animals (Preston, 1978, p. 38).

For archaeologists to understand oral traditions, they would benefit from understanding Indigenous languages, worldviews, and epistemologies. There are vast differences between Western and Indigenous perceptions of who and what forms a society or family. To interpret oral traditions requires more than a "native informant". It requires academics to step outside the colonial mind frame and become open to understanding other realities, to surrender their authority, power, and beliefs of their own supremacy. In the Indigenous world all beings have agency and equality humans are but one member of many species with rights deserving of respect, and with the abilities of culture, language, and agency (Preston, 1999, p. 36).

Oral histories of Indigenous people's time and place on the land come from firsthand knowledge and experience. Oral traditions, songs and dances, hold histories of extinct species such as mammoth and mastodons, providing evidence of early peoples interaction with extinct species over 10,000 years ago. In weaving oral traditions and stories held in the land (archaeological sites), we create opportunities to gain a much richer and more informed view of the past. Weaving oral histories with stories on the land (archaeological sites), and rewriting the Indigenous past, requires Western archaeologists to become

informed of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. This also requires archaeologists to work with Indigenous scholars, knowledge holdres, and communities as equals. In rewriting the Indigenous poast we push back against racism and normalized violence prevalent in contemporary society. By being open mined and decolonizing their minds regarded the dehumanized Indigenous past, archaeologists, and scholars weave paths towards a better more just future for all people.

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