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Competing interpretations of the land: presenting multi-experiential archaeology

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This article introduces multi-experiential archaeology, a critical concept incorporating aspects of agency, multi-vocal and landscape theories. Multi-experiential archaeologies explore a wider range of human experience than has been typical in traditional site-based and archaeo-centric approaches, but it can be argued that such an inclusive approach serves to undermine or destabilise the archaeological discipline. Case-studies drawn from indigenous-colonial interaction illustrate the potential of multi-experiential archaeology to present new, critically informed and ethically situated interpretations of the past.

In this discussion of multi-experiential archaeology, I will argue that multivocal and landscape archaeologies can be used in combination with inter-disciplinary approaches to explore a wider range of human experience than has been available through a traditional site-based approach to archaeology. I suggest that more critical, inclusive approaches to the past are best described as multi-experiential, as they go beyond multivocality to recognise the ways in which different understandings of the world impact on the human activities that archaeologists seek to reconstruct. To avoid the need for repetition of this point, the term 'viewpoint' will be used throughout to signify the ways of knowing particular to an individual or a group. While this term does seem to prioritise the visual experience, it is used to acknowledge the personal ideological lens through which human experience is filtered. Alternative terms, such as standpoint or worldview, were considered but discounted as suggestive of an inflexible viewpoint and cultural homogeneity respectively. Following an introduction to the term multi-experiential, we will explore the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach as observed in case studies drawn from indigenous archaeology. We will see that multi-experiential archaeologies are recovering new information, presenting more informed interpretations and having a positive impact on the understanding of indigenous cultures in the past and the present, but that the

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relativity and inclusivity of such an approach also threatens to undermine or destabilise the archaeological practice.

THE MULTI-EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

As a critical concept, multi-experiential archaeology signifies those research projects which take into account that unique personal experiences have shaped not only the identities of the people we study, but influence contemporary perceptions of archaeology and generate individual or academic bias. By recognising and acknowledging this diversity, multi-experiential archaeologies seek to integrate, rather than polarise, multiple interpretations and to redress misconceptions informed by traditional opinions. These approaches also serve to recover information which has been excluded from dominant historical narratives and help to reassert the agency of individuals in the past. As indigenous archaeologies are particularly prone to being misperceived, ignored or homogenised, examples of interactions between colonial and indigenous societies are used to demonstrate the ability of multi-experiential archaeologies to present new, critically informed and ethically situated interpretations of the past. The practice of a multi-experiential archaeology is characterised by the inclusion of a range of different disciplinary, methodological, critical and theoretical approaches. These approaches vary according to the context they are employed in, but typically include aspects of landscape and multivocal theory, ethnography and analysis of the political context with the explicit aim of recovering the full range of past experiences.

RESISTANCE TO COLONIAL RULE

With a focus on a broader understanding of the range of human activities, multi-experiential archaeology has the potential to recover information which has traditionally been excluded or under-played in the archaeological narrative; for example, in the analysis of non-typical, lesser known or less significant sites. This is particularly relevant to the study of resistance to colonial rule, which often manifests as a number of distinctive practices, some of which were deliberately hidden from view. Michael Given's *The Archaeology of the Colonized* deals with the complexities of colonial archaeology, particularly with regard to identifying

the practices of resistance in the archaeological record.[1] Given's aim, to redress the tendency to 'lump together the colonized and stereotype them as passive, unthinking machines', highlights the absence of the colonized experience from the historical narrative and the need for a targeted approach to its recovery.[2] A multi-experiential approach, including aspects of mythology, landscape theory, multivocalism and politics, serves to uncover a highly nuanced account of the experiences of and responses to, colonisation. The advantage of the multi-experiential approach is not only that it gives us access to new information and interpretations, but can serve to reclaim the agency of colonized individuals who have traditionally been ignored, homogenised or over-simplified in historical narratives.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

By acknowledging multiple viewpoints, we immediately recognise the diversity and complexities of both colonised and colonising societies. This can help us to break down the division between pre- and post-contact archaeologies which are problematic in that they separate the past into two temporally unbalanced phases and serve to homogenise pre-colonial activity, underplaying continuing indigenous experiences and suggesting a model of linear progression which can be used as a justification for colonial activity. In a multi-experiential narrative pre-contact indigenous societies are no longer reduced to one timeless and static culture or worldview, but are recognized as a range of communities and individuals whose experiences and viewpoints are determined by different temporal, geographic, social and personal experiences. This allows us to reconceive of Australian Aboriginality, for example, as the world's longest surviving cultural group, rather than the longest surviving cultural viewpoint.[3] This small change in nomenclature results in a new form of freedom for the understanding of Aboriginality as a cultural practice. Once we recognise the fluidity of how identity is enacted, modern-day practices of Aboriginality are no longer perceived as separate from 'traditional' practices, but are recontextualised as the diverse and on-going result of the interactions between social beliefs and personal context.

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[1] M. Given, *The Archaeology of the Colonized* (London, 2004).

[2] Ibid., 10.

[3] B. David, *Landscapes, Rock-Art and the Dreaming* (London, 2002), 1.

The ability to augment the historical record allows archaeology to play more than a theoretical role in the understanding of cultural diversity, and this recognition of multiple viewpoints serves as a reminder of the agency of individuals in the past. In the search for evidence of multiple viewpoints, multi-experiential archaeology can challenge inaccuracies such as the typical portrayal of a 'timeless' Aboriginal culture. Bruno David argues that we can identify the practices informed by specific Dreaming stories in the archaeological record and demonstrates that the physical responses to Aboriginal belief systems have changed over time. He uses ethnography to identify those Dreaming stories which have impacted people's interactions with landscape and conducts excavations to identify and analyse their effect. One such excavation took place at Ngarabullgan, a mountainous area described in the oral tradition as home to malicious spirits. Here, David conducted a number of excavations in areas displaying, or likely to yield, evidence of human activity. Across the area, radiocarbon dating indicated a systematic abandonment of sites around 600 years ago. This abandonment does not correlate to any regional changes in land use nor can it be explained by environmental change. The abandonment of caves and rock shelters at Ngarabullgan is therefore interpreted as a localised, social adaptation; a conclusion which could have been discounted as speculative had the local traditions not provided an explanation.[4] Without specific evidence explaining a changing practice, some archaeologists would tend to assume, and search for, an economic explanation, but David's work with the Aboriginal Dreaming stories has shown that change can also be socially motivated. When attention is brought to the different ways in which people understand the world, archaeologists are reminded of the range of possible motivations behind a decision which helps to prevent the over-playing of economic factors and encourages an approach which recognises the interplay of social and economic influence.

Multi-experiential archaeology helps us to take a more holistic approach to understanding the motivations and experiences of people in the past, and by understanding that there are multiple ways of knowing and being, we give agency back to the individuals who make up a society, and create a frame of reference for changing practices. This helps us to break down the barriers between contact and colonial history and recast different practices as a process of adapting and

[4] Ibid., 33-47.

integrating social practices. The advantage here is part of the move towards an understanding of the past which actively recognises and respects the variety of lived experiences within one cultural grouping; a move which allows us to recognise a cultural continuity which might otherwise have been missed, and to create more accurate and informed understandings of the past.

CULTURAL CONTINUITY

In the Australian context, the perceived lack of cultural continuity has been reinforced by a lack of formally acknowledged post-colonial indigenous sites. While there are on-going attempts to redress the imbalance at governmental and academic level (see, for example, the 'Living Places' project in New South Wales), there is a lack of awareness and representation of post-contact Aboriginality in the archaeological record which serves to further the notion of an ancient culture, severing contemporary Aboriginal people from their heritage and implying the sort of linear progressive model which has been used to justify colonisation. [5] By underrepresenting post-contact Aboriginality in the archaeological record, we deny the presence of indigenous culture in favour of a more simplistic definition of replacement. Although post-colonial indigeneity is harder to locate in the landscape on a practical level, as the inorganic materials present in European sites are more likely to survive and it can be hard to distinguish between colonial and Aboriginal use of European artefacts, this does not excuse the over-simplification of historical narratives, especially when these narratives serve to reinforce the position of a politically dominant community.[6] By focussing on a broader range of activities and experiences we can discover or recover information which is not necessarily included in the dominant narrative; multi-experiential archaeologies serve to redress inaccuracies and misconceptions.

Denis Byrne's focus on identifying post-colonial Aboriginal sites is both an academic and a social act. A multi-experiential approach shows there were at least two different ways of understanding and using the landscape; the documented grid through which Europeans tended to move, delineating areas of private and

[5] Department of Environment & Heritage, *Aboriginal 'Living Places'* (New South Wales, 2002).
[6] D. Byrne, 'Nervous Landscapes: Race and Space in Australia' (2003) *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 171-172.

public land, and the unwritten and over-lapping maps of individual Aboriginal experiences including areas of sustenance and social activity.[7] While both kinds of map used the same topographical basis and identify places for different activities and how to move between these, they share neither form nor effect. In the following example, we see that Aboriginal interaction with the post-colonial landscape was not necessarily influenced by the physical manifestations of colonialism:

> Balbuk had been born on Huirison Island at the Causeway, and from there a straight track had led to the place where she had once gathered jilgies and vegetable food with the women, in the swamp where Perth railway station now stands. Through fences and over them, Balbuk took the straight path to the end. When a house was built in the way, she broke its fence-pailings with her digging stick and charged up the steps and through the rooms.[8]

While there can be indefinite speculation as to Balbuk's intentions (for example, comfort in the face of change, unconcerned continuity or defiance of the colonial order), the act itself proves that there are more factors at play in deciding how to move through a landscape than functional consideration. This conclusion highlights the importance of taking into account different viewpoints in order to understand human behaviour. Multi-experiential approaches, which integrate different techniques and ways of knowing, enable us to understand conflict and resistance at an individual level, and to reconstruct a more personal experience of the past.

LIMITING THE HERITAGE PRACTITIONER

Though we have discussed a number of multi-experiential archaeology's advantages, it is important to recognise the disadvantages of such an approach, particularly with regard to the practice of archaeology. While we may gain a fuller understanding of the human experience in the past, we also lose the sense of

[7] Ibid., 180.

[8] S. Muecke, *No Road: bitumen all the way* (Freemantle, 1997), 183 (as cited in Byrne 2003, 182).

authority and certainty which some stakeholders, not least funders, expect from the archaeological discipline.

At Manning Valley, ethnography allows Byrne to identify the gaps in the colonial grid, such as pathways, waterways, external boundaries and areas set aside, but not yet developed, for public use, which he argues represent a form of Aboriginal 'subversion' of the prescribed colonial landscape.[9] The physical layout recorded in official maps does not represent the ultimate layout of a place such as Manning Valley, nor the ways in which people, both European and Aboriginal, chose to interact with it. By critically analysing the limitations of source material, multi-experiential archaeology is well placed to recognise misinformation and bias, and to counteract this with additional information. For Byrne this means integrating ethnography into the approach, but the same issues can arise when there is no access to contemporary records or memories. This poses a problem for the multi-experiential approach in that we do not necessarily have access to contemporary viewpoints in all situations; when we acknowledge the diversity of responses to a physical landscape, we become aware of our limitations as heritage practitioners. While this precludes the attribution of definite motivations to certain activities, it does allow for the consideration of more intuitive, humanistic suggestions. As with the Balbuk example above, the multi-experiential approach brings us closer to the human experience, but renders all interpretations relative and, therefore, indecisive.

As well as generating uncertainty, the multi-experiential mode of thinking is problematic as it calls into question the value of the archaeological practice. Many critiques of post-processual approaches similar to multi-experiential archaeology claim that engaging with issues such as agency and multivocality affects our ability to reach archaeological conclusions:

[9] Byrne 2003, 181-2.

> Much of the anxiety about multivocality has stemmed from a desire to avoid a slippage into a disabling relativism. As Bruce Trigger has insisted, archaeologists need to be able to evaluate different accounts of the past even if a diversity of indigenous and other perspectives is acknowledged and even celebrated.[10]

The concern with relativism is that we can never remove our own bias, nor synthesise all viewpoints, and so accepting the diversity of lived experiences paralyses the archaeological practice. While this argument is valid, and recognises the repercussions of multivocality - how can we secure funding without providing answers, how can we present findings if they are inherently biased and should we even practice archaeology if we are not working towards an objective understanding of the past - I would argue that the hyper-relativity argument is based upon another dichotomy which polarises objectivity and subjectivity. If we replace this with a sliding scale, we are able to move between subjectivity and objectivity as required, and we also recognise that the two are not mutually exclusive. As the successful approaches outlined above have shown, the acceptance of relativism does not render the archaeologist useless, but forces us to analyse and react to the biases created by personal, academic and nationalised viewpoints.

By identifying our biased tendencies we are in a position to challenge them using an understanding of alternative viewpoints, thus moving towards interpretations and narratives which are more, but not completely, objective. Although multi-experiential approaches force us to acknowledge our limitations, this can actually be perceived as an advantage in that it removes our obligation to an impossible objectivity and allows us to reconstruct a more inclusive and intuitive practice.

PRACTICING MULTI-EXPERIENTIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

The multi-experiential approach impacts not just how we interpret the past, but on the role and responsibilities of the heritage practitioner in contemporary

[10] M. Johnson, 'Making a Home: Archaeologies of the Medieval English Village' in: J. Habu, C. Fawcett & J. Matsunaga (eds.), *Evaluating Multiple Narratives: Beyond Nationalist, Colonialist, Imperialist Archaeologies* (New York, 2008), 51.

society. One example which illustrates both academic bias and the impact of recognising multiple viewpoints is found in Michael Blakey's study of the New York African Burial Ground. By analysing previous historical and anthropological narratives, Blakey identifies a tendency to deny the humanity of America's historic Black population. An awareness of this bias motivates Blakey to design a methodology which is critically aware and makes a deliberate effort 'to correct these distortions and omissions'.[11] His multi-experiential approach attempts to democratize the archaeological process by engaging in discussion with both the funding body and descendant communities prior to conducting research. While this step is legally required under The National Historic Preservation Act of the United States, 1966, it has not found favour with some heritage professionals who argue for their exclusive rights as stewards of the past. Blakey presents his decision to conduct community engagement as an ethically and academically motivated decision, rather than a legal obligation; this highlights the difficulty of enforcing heritage laws and the on-going authority of heritage professionals to make personally informed decisions.[12] Whatever the motivation, the result of Blakey's community engagement was the recognition that the traditional description of the African population in colonial America as 'slaves' denied any individual identity or agency prior to, and distinguished from, the role of servitude. The term 'enslaved Africans' recognises that individual identity is not based on a societal role and draws attention to the people who demanded and facilitated this slavery.[13] By taking into account the viewpoint of the present-day communities affected by his research, Blakey's report presents a more historically accurate and socially valuable understanding of slavery. Multi-experiential approaches have the ability not only to highlight historical truths, but to address issues which affect contemporary society.

A further result of Blakey's inclusive approach is the diversity of viewpoints represented by his team. While the integration of multiple disciplines, specialists and cultures is not exclusive to multi-experiential, nor critical, archaeology, it is

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[11] M. Blakey, 'An Ethical Epistemology of Publicly Engaged Biocultural Research' in: Habu, J., Fawcett, C. & Matsunaga, J. (eds.) *Evaluating Multiple Narratives: Beyond Nationalist, Colonialist, Imperialist Archaeologies* (New York, 2008), 19.

[12] Ibid., 20.

[13] Ibid., 21-22.

still worth examining the benefits of having access to multiple opinions while conducting research. At the New York West African Burial Ground:

> the diasporic scope of expertise allowed us to find meaningful evidence where narrower expertise could not have 'seen' it. The use of quartz crystals as funerary objects required an African archaeological background whereas Americanist archaeologists might have assigned them no meaning [reference omitted]; the heart-shaped symbol, believed to be of Akan origin and meaning [reference omitted], was assumed to have a European, Christian meaning in the absence of anyone who could recognize an Akan adinkra symbol.[14]

This is a simple illustration of the notion that interpretation, which is inevitably based upon particular experiences and knowledge, is subjective. Although we can recognise a symbol as having a particular meaning in one context, we cannot objectively conclude that it holds the same meaning in another; it is only by being aware of different ways of viewing the world that we become aware of alternative interpretations, which can then be integrated with archaeological knowledge to generate the most appropriate interpretation. While the New York African Burial Ground is not an example of colonising an indigenous homeland, it is still an example of interaction between two cultures, where one has been presumed to hold the majority of the power; if there is diversity, continuity and agency in individuals removed from their cultural heartland, then it stands to reason that there must certainly be individuality where people have been colonised in their own lands. Further, if multi-experiential approaches can recover useful information in the former, they have the potential to yield better results in the latter. The advantages of acknowledging different viewpoints in colonial archaeology is two-fold: by engaging with the community, we ensure that work is ethically sound and relevant to the wider community, and by engaging with alternative ways of knowing, we can generate more informed conclusions.

[14] Ibid., 26.

CONCLUSION

It is clear, then, that the practice of multi-experiential archaeology takes many forms and incorporates a range of practices, key to which is the recognition of multiple viewpoints and the reflection of this in the research methodology. Such an approach limits the potential to present conclusive interpretations of the past, but offers a more nuanced understanding of individual experiences. By seeking out practices of resistance to colonial rule, Michael Given reasserts the agency and individuality of colonised populations, while Bruno David's exploration of Aboriginal Dreaming demonstrates the evolution of cultural practices and helps to challenge the dominant perception of ancient cultures as static. With the deliberate intention of identifying post-contact Aboriginal sites, David Byrne discovers multiple ways of engaging with a prescribed landscape and helps to fill in the gap between pre- and post-contact Aboriginality. Michael Blakey engages with contemporary stakeholders and shows that a multi-experiential approach can produce ethically engaged research and contribute to a fuller understanding of non-Western cultures. These examples illustrate that by challenging dominant historical narratives, multi-experiential archaeologies can inform our understanding of modern-day indigeneity.

By limiting how far we can project our own experiences onto the past, we not only deter biased, false or hyper-interpretive conclusions, but we are also forced to be more innovative with what we do know and how we can know it. By acknowledging the many ways of experiencing and interpreting the world, we paradoxically create a more objective understanding of the past as made up of experiences which are themselves complex, diverse and indefinable. Acknowledging different ways of knowing is risky, as it leaves historical 'certainties' up for public debate, challenges traditional ways of knowing the past and threatens to undermine the authority of the archaeological discipline. Yet, it is only by engaging in wide-ranging discussion that we can generate more informed interpretations, and by challenging how we know that we can identify bias, errors and areas of potential, allowing us to re-examine existing evidence or to generate new information. When we deprivilege dominant viewpoints, we start a process of dialogue which brings to light forms of evidence and methods of interpretation which have not traditionally been adopted into the archaeological discipline, and pave the way for the inclusion of local, indigenous or religious communities

whose interpretations of the past have typically been ignored, homogenised or over-simplified. I would argue then, that the advantages and disadvantages of the multi-experiential approach are one and the same; by decentralising the subject, we diversify the practice of archaeology, resulting in something that is technically more complicated, yet more intuitive; less certain and therefore more accurate.

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