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1

Archaeology

A WAY OF TELLING STORIES

SEVERAL SUMMERS ago I spent a bunch of time in my office in the Department of Anthropology at Central Connecticut State University following my archaeology field school. A work crew of carpenters and sheet rockers from campus was diligently reconfiguring our department offices and I got to interact with the guys, who were fascinated by my work as an archaeologist. As a user of modern power tools, one of the guys was deeply interested in how stone tools were made and used. But here's the thing. For the next few years, whenever I'd run into him on campus, his greeting was always the same: "Hey Dr. Feder! How's the dinosaur business?"

Damn! Dinosaurs! The notion that archaeology involves digging up dinosaurs is quite common and a difficult one to debunk, but here you go: WE DON'T DIG UP DINOSAURS. Full stop. Sorry for the shouting. Paleontologists dig up dinosaurs. Dinosaurs became extinct about sixty-five million years ago. I am an archaeologist. The focus of my discipline is on the human species. Our most ancient human ancestors evolved in Africa about seven million years ago, and the oldest sites I discuss in this book are much younger than that, maybe twenty-five thousand or thirty thousand years old at the most. So no. There are no dinosaurs in this book. Sorry. Now let me disabuse you of a few other and, to be honest, more harmful preconceptions you might have about a book with "archaeological" right there in the title.

Archaeology: A Way of Telling Stories

Believe it or not, though I am an archaeologist and “archaeological” is right there in the title of this book, I admit to feeling a little ambivalent about the use of that term to describe what this book is really about. At least in a sense, I am more comfortable describing this book as a work of “history,” in the broadest sense of that term. That rich and temporally “deep” history reflects the story of the ancestors of peoples who are still here and, in many cases, continue to follow the cultural practices of their ancestors.

“History” with a Capital *H*

I think the subtitle of Madonna L. Moss’s book about the Native People of the northwest coast of North America (chapter 15) applies to this book: *Archaeology as Deep History*.¹ My goal in this book is to provide a “deep history” of the Native People of North America with archaeology at the core of that history.

This book conveys the story of Native America primarily, but not exclusively, through the science of archaeology. So I will focus on more than just hardware here. Native People told and continue to tell their own histories, passed down across generations, providing their own version of past events. Furthermore, when Europeans arrived in North America in the sixteenth century, they recorded in writing their experiences here, including a description of the cultures of the Native People they encountered and a history of their interactions with them. The fact I am an archaeologist and that this book has “archaeological” in the title does not imply that I will or should ignore oral histories passed down by Native People or written histories told by non-Native explorers, soldiers, traders, missionaries, and settlers.

Archaeology: A History of People as Told by Landscapes, Places, and Things

Angeline Mitchell was a truly remarkable person. She was born in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, in 1854. Bridgewater is about 240 kilometers (150 miles) from my home in northwest Connecticut. So about

240 kilometers and 170 years separate Angie Mitchell and me, yet I feel like I know her because I have read the diary she kept describing her life, her exploits, and her experiences as a pioneer teacher in Arizona. Her diary is housed at the Sharlot Hall Museum in Prescott, Arizona; it has been published and, as I mentioned, I have read it. It is illuminating, fascinating, and simply quite wonderful.²

Here's what we know about her. When Angie was just a kid, her dad moved the family from Massachusetts to Kansas, where she later attended the University of Kansas at Lawrence. In 1873, at the age of nineteen, she obtained the equivalent of a teaching certificate there. With that certificate in hand, she taught at a number of schools in Kansas over the course of the next couple of years. When her mother and father moved west in 1875, she followed them to the pioneer city of Prescott, in the Arizona Territory (Arizona did not become a state until 1912), located about one hundred miles north of Phoenix.

She taught in Prescott for a few years and then, in 1880, when she was just twenty-six years old, she agreed to a position far to the east in an area sparsely populated by Anglos, deep in the wild area of what was then and is still called the Tonto Basin.

It took not a little courage for a young person to remove herself from the far more cosmopolitan confines of Prescott, with its population of 3,800, to what at the time was and still is pretty wild country, but Angie seems to have had both an adventurous soul and a commitment to teaching in an area sorely in need of a teacher. Though her mother and fiancé accompanied her initially to help get her settled in, they soon left her alone. In her own words, "Today for the first time in my life, I know what it is to feel utterly cast away and homesick."³

Once Angie adapted to her new surroundings, however, she embraced her life as a teacher in the wilderness, and she made multiple diary entries describing the educational adventures she took with her students, including one that is of the most interest to us here. On the field trip in question, Angie, with students in tow, encountered a fantastic, abandoned Native American cliff dwelling community consisting of two separate structures, one only partway up a cliff, the second higher up, and each ensconced in its own naturally eroded niche (Figure 1.1,



FIGURE 1.1, COLOR PLATE 1. The lower cliff dwelling at what is today Tonto National Monument in eastern Arizona. Teacher Angie Mitchell's 1880 visit to this site with her students inspired her to think about the connectedness of all people, whatever their culture. Kenneth L. Feder

Color Plate 1). Her description of the site is so detailed that, when rangers from the National Park Service were presented with a copy of her diary, they immediately were able to identify the place she and her students explored, cliff dwellings in what was designated Tonto National Monument in 1907.⁴ If you're ever in eastern Arizona, I encourage you to visit it (it's about two and a half hours north of Tucson), walk in Angie's footsteps, and explore the houses lived in by Native Americans more than eight hundred years ago.

In the evening, with the moon rising in the clear, black, star-strewn sky, Angie wrote in her diary about the feelings that welled up in her as she thought about her day at the cliff dwellings that she and her students had just explored:

It seemed so strange to be chatting and laughing so gaily in a house built unknown centuries ago by people unlike us in appearance but who had known joy and grief, pleasure and pain same as our race of today knows them, and who had laughed, cried, sung, danced,

married & died, mourned or rejoiced their lives away in this once populous town, or castle, or whatever one would call it! It made an uncanny feeling come over us as we rested till moon rise and talked of this long dead people and told the little we knew concerning them.⁵

Angie has done a marvelous job here reflecting on the “uncanny” feeling all archaeologists experience when they encounter the stuff left behind by human beings simply living their lives. She also remarkably expresses my own philosophy as an archaeologist, and what I hope to accomplish for the readers of this book and all of my other publications. I hope I can convey to you in these pages that same feeling of uncanny commonality and unity Angie so eloquently expresses in her diary about a people who, though removed from us in time and, for most of us, culture, are nevertheless fundamentally in step with our own humanity.

Angie died in 1909, two years after Tonto received its designation as a national monument and three years before Arizona became a state. Hers was a life well lived.

Who Owns America's Past?

I think it's fair to say that most people are proud of the unique heritage and history of their particular ethnic group, nationality, or culture. Most people feel great pride in their ancestors for overcoming the challenges they confronted, for their many achievements, and for the technological and social advances reflected in those deep histories. A small subset of people in these groups actually devote their lives to the study and celebration of their histories (in the broadest sense of that word).

For example, the famed but not uncontroversial secretary general of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, Zahi Hawass, is an Egyptian archaeologist. Hawass spent his career excavating archaeological sites in Egypt, analyzing the written record of ancient Egyptians, writing books, participating in documentaries, and generally sharing his

knowledge about ancestral Egyptians in myriad ways while, okay, also fronting for a sort of archaeology-chic clothing line. To reiterate, he is an *Egyptian* who works toward revealing the story of ancient *Egypt*.

Italian archaeologists often focus on the accomplishments of ancient Romans and Etruscans. K. C. Chang, a Chinese American archaeology professor who taught for years at Yale University, devoted his career to the analysis of Chinese prehistory. In these examples, the researchers focused on the roots of their own people, proudly telling their stories through archaeology and history.

The story of the history and archaeology of the Americas has been sadly different. The First People were, in large measure, displaced through disease but also undeniably through the political and military actions of an invading, colonial power (chapters 17 and 18). In large measure it is the descendants of those colonizers who have written the histories of Native People. In other words, that history, that archaeology, has been conducted by outsiders. Among those outsiders is, well, me.

Admittedly, the relationship between many Native People and outsider archaeologists has been problematic. Many Native People understandably view archaeology as simply another part of the colonialist program of usurpation and oppression. After all, Native People have their own histories, often handed down for generations. We'll talk about some of those histories in this book. Why do they need outsiders (like me) to impose a different story by digging holes in the ground and, too often, by disturbing their ancestors and treating them like things and not people? I get it.

As noted, I am one of those outsiders. I am not a Native person. My ancestors were Eastern European Jews who fled oppression and sought economic opportunity in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century. I am forever grateful for the safe haven America provided to my ancestors. I am alive and able to be an archaeologist and an author because of that gift. I am an archaeologist whose focus is Native America, not because archaeology affords me the opportunity to explore the history of my own people but because of my abiding interest in and respect for the cultures and histories of those Native People.

A New Archaeology

On the issue of “who owns the past,” many non-Native archaeologists in North America have adopted a new approach and emphasis in recent years, no longer dictating Native American history without regard for the vast body of knowledge already possessed by Native People, and no longer ignoring how the work of archaeology affects those Native People. Labeled “archaeology’s new purpose,” the goal of this “new archaeology” is for Native People to be empowered to reclaim their past through the use of the discipline.⁶ This new archaeology is far more likely to include the knowledge possessed by Indigenous folks, to collaborate with them, to involve them in all aspects of the work, and to recognize and incorporate their traditional knowledge with the nuts and bolts of archaeology. In some cases, in fact, non-Native archaeologists actually directly work for the Native folks who see the value of archaeology not in supplanting their knowledge but in supplementing it.

An Archaeology of Their Own

Another enormously positive development in the archaeology of the Native People of America is the fact that Native Americans themselves are becoming archaeologists and telling their own stories through their archaeological research.

Bertha Parker Pallan is often credited with being the first Indigenous archaeologist. She was of Abenaki and Seneca (East Coast) descent and first worked in the field in the 1920s. As such, some call Pallan the mother of all of the Native archaeologists who followed her. Though they continue to represent a very small percentage of the national organization of American archaeologists (the Society for American Archaeology), the number of Indigenous archaeologists is growing. For example, an ex-student of mine, and now friend and colleague, Jay Levy, was born to a Native family in South America. He was adopted as a baby by a white couple in Connecticut and later connected to his Native roots. Jay majored in anthropology at my institution, Central Connecticut State University; minored in archaeology; took every course I

offered; and was a participant in my archaeology field school, helping excavate a one-thousand-year-old site in Simsbury, Connecticut. Jay is now the staff archaeologist in the Mohegan Tribe's Tribal Historic Preservation Office and is involved in research, preservation, and outreach on the Mohegan reservation, which is also in Connecticut.

I met archaeologist Kenny Bowekaty at the Pueblo of Zuni in central New Mexico in 2022. Though the people who live there today are commonly called Zuni, that name really refers to the place where their pueblo is located, on the Zuni River in New Mexico. In their language *zuni* simply means “beauty.” Having been there, I believe the name is entirely appropriate. The people who live in Zuni Pueblo (also called Halona) actually call themselves A:shiwi, but they don't object to being called Zuni so I will use the two names interchangeably. It's like living in New York City and people calling you a New Yorker. We will visit Zuni Pueblo and highlight Bowekaty's work in chapter 14.

Kenny is A:shiwi, or Zuni, and a trained (at Stanford University), experienced archaeologist. He leads excavations on Zuni land, works in historic preservation, and conducts an amazing amount of outreach, sharing the story of his people with the world based on a combination of archaeology, history, and also the traditional knowledge passed down in his family. Kenny gives wonderfully informative and heartfelt tours of Zuni. His ability to combine the evidence he has collected through his archaeological research and the details of stories told to him by his grandfathers and grandmothers, and their grandfathers and grandmothers before them is extraordinarily important. When Kenny shared with us his knowledge of the ceremonies likely conducted at the sacred structures (kivas) at the archaeological site now called the Village of the Great Kivas, he did so from the perspective of a scholar with multiple channels of evidence. When he explained the meaning of the petroglyphs adorning the rock face that looms above the Village of the Great Kivas (dating to a far earlier period), he was able to do so from a Zuni perspective (chapter 16). And when he showed us a series of amazing painted images (pictographs) in a natural alcove at the top of the cliff, he knew they were a recent manifestation of a traditional practice of art because he lives at Zuni and the A:shiwi who live there know they



FIGURE 1.2, COLOR PLATE 2. A recent example (1960s) of a continuing artistic tradition (in this case, pictographs) among the Zuni people in their New Mexico homeland. Kenneth L. Feder

were painted in the 1960s by men working on the construction of a nearby reservoir (Figure 1.2, Color Plate 2).

Kenny Bowekaty is a great example of a new kind of archaeology in which traditional knowledge is seen as every bit as important and informative as that of the people with trowels and tape measures, maybe especially because he is fluent in both kinds of knowledge. If you have a chance to visit Zuni Pueblo (and you should!), make sure to contact their culture center and book a tour with him!⁷

Jay Levy and Kenny Bowekaty are not the only Native People practicing archaeology. A list of others who are, in a sense, dragging the archaeological and biological anthropological professions along by moral force as well as by their application of science includes Dorothy Lippert (Choctaw; Smithsonian Institution); Kim Tallbear (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate; University of Alberta); Joe Watkins (Choctaw; former president of the Society for American Archaeology); Paulette Steeves (Cree/Métis; Algoma University) (see chapter 7); Kisha Supernant (Métis/Papaschase/British; director of the Institute of Prairie and Indigenous

Archaeology and a professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Alberta) (see chapter 18); Norma Johnson (a citizen of the Kenaitze Indian Tribe; bioarchaeologist who works for the Chickaloon Village Traditional Council doing historic preservation work in Alaska); and Kurly Tlapoyawa (Chicano/Nawa/Mazewalli; a field archaeologist who, along with Ruben Arellano Tlakatekatl, hosts the fantastic podcast *Tales from Aztlanis*). The number of Native archaeologists is growing, and programs like the archaeology field school for Indigenous People in Canada are helping by presenting archaeology as a tool for “reclaiming” Native history.⁸

We can at least begin to address the grievances of the past, and we’ll get a better, richer, and more inclusive archaeology as an increasing number of Native People embrace the discipline as a way of telling what is, after all, their story.

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