

MERCILESS GREETINGS, WICKED SERVANTS OF THE AGE OF ARCHAEO-RACIALISM

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In the archaeological origin story of ancient America, the first Americans appeared long ago in the chill dying mists of the terminal Pleistocene. The details of this event and the details of what happened after that have not been easy to gather, but it is a compelling tale of adventure, of discovery. Archaeological inquiry into these details surely gives us a marvelous way to encounter what it means to be human. And the way archaeologists tell this origin story would give us an innocent enough human drama, were it not for the way that the historically recent idea of race has insisted on writing itself into the distant past.

For in the hands of archaeology these ancient folk soon came to be called “Paleoindians”—a name that draws meaning from the undiluted ingredients of racial terminology. And hard upon the heels of these racially constructed Paleoindians, plenty of racial Indians, American Indians, and Native Americans came to throng archaeological constructions of ancient America. With this patently unhistorical origin story firmly in hand, it is ironic that these same archaeologists typically deem “Indian” origin stories to be patently unhistorical. This situation points to a serious problem in “science-like” archaeology.

Given the fact that the idea of race is a historically recent invention that science has discredited as an explanation of humankind, it seems appropriate for archaeology to rethink the doing of race and race-based storytelling. And since the truth about race is widely known among American archaeologists, it is puzzling that this truth has not already become more evident throughout archaeological discourse.

To proceed with promoting any substantive recalibration of race in archaeological practice, it would be desirable for SAA to have broad support from its membership, as well as from public constituencies who have come to expect the production of race-based archaeology. And to the degree that American archaeology focuses on the ancient human past of

America, it is of particular interest that in recent years ever-increasing numbers of stake-holding Indians—self-identified adherents to racial Indianhood—have appeared in archaeology, wielding Ph.D.s and trowels as they circle the archaeological meta-narrative. As open racialists bent on joining a field of study that has openly centered itself upon the precepts of race, these racialists will likely feel some suspicion about new efforts to reconfigure the traditional practices of racial archaeology. In fact, if SAA takes any action to truly change the master narrative of race in America, I predict that many racial Indians will strongly object.

If SAA is to find meaningful ways to engage with adherents to Indian racial identity, it must have an accurate and useful critique of race and racial Indianhood. This seems essential because most racial Indian archaeologists will stay deeply committed to race. In the story that Indians tell one another around their electronic online campfires, Indian racial identity serves as a unifying source of power in advancing both racial and community social agendas. An aura of optimistic possibility attends the doing of racial Indianhood since it has a record of success. Responding to historical American anti-Indian storytelling that portrayed Indianness as debilitating cultural baggage, the late twentieth-century Indian sovereignty movement proved that Indian racial identity could serve as a productive source of social power in shoring up embattled racial Indian sovereignties.

Indians see racial bonding as an effective response to white racism and its legacies. The master narrative of racial Indianhood treats white oppression as an almost insurmountable problem, and this story acts as a powerful bonding agent for Indian group identity. It also provides a compelling inspirational message, suggesting to Indian people that someday the heroic doing of racial Indianhood may well succeed in overcoming the implacable evils of white colonialism and white racism. For this miraculous epic achievement to ever have a fighting chance, all must stay faithful to race.

It is ironic that Indians believe that the doing of race will ultimately save them from the doing of race. In the tragic reality hidden beneath this worldview, race is enacted to save Indians from the racist outcomes of race, but doing race mainly serves to propagate ever more race and ever more racism. Academic Indian Studies advances this circular proposition and discourages inquiry into the shortcomings of racial Indianhood because adherents to Indian racial identity have invested so completely in the racial status quo. For Indians, allegiance to the idea of being Indian inspires hope and a devotional attitude toward race as a social project. Race must be enacted, not questioned. An enhanced interrogation of white racism is the proper agenda, not critical inquiry into racial Indianhood.

It is therefore difficult for racial Indians to see as a problem the way race commits their tribal governments to a subaltern role in an undemocratic arrangement—one that racially categorizes formerly independent sovereignties as “Indian tribes” subject to race-based “federal Indian law.” In the tripartite American polity, the federal government and state governments wield real sovereign power, while racially defined Indian tribes are third-class “domestic dependent nations” subject to federal plenary power, with no formal participatory voice in the exercise of that power. Seeing the coming end of race as a problem to ignore rather than as a strategic opportunity... well, no philosopher of Indian law has anything like a plan for evolving racial sovereignties away from race because racial Indians are way too busy with the project of convincing Americans to stay true to race-based storytelling and racial identity.

But an unforeseen and portentous problem has recently become evident. Aside from the scientific undermining of race as a viable biological reality—a rather cryptic bit of information that has successfully confined itself to esoteric technical academic literature—it turns out that ever-increasing numbers of adherents to racial whiteness have gradually become what I term “former whites.” When obliged to do race, former whites will always self-identify as “white.” But these alleged whites do not seek out white cultural venues, white social networks, and white careers. Former whites lack allegiance to any kind of social agenda that involves exclusively improving the social circumstances of white people. These people are not white people; they are former whites. Since former whites are tepid producers of racial culture, they must be forced to stay faithful to the making of race. This unacknowledged truth is even now powerfully reshaping the American world. With whispered rumors of how people can forego the doing of racial identity, the abandonment of racial whiteness portends the coming end of race.

I think these circumstances should give SAA and its membership pause in the doing of race. Indians often say they want more sovereignty, not less—they want old-fashioned sovereign independence. When they realize that race prevents this possibility by locking their “Indian” tribal governments into anachronistic and oppressive forms of American racialism, they will remember who actively urged them to keep bound to race. This may be largely irrelevant to SAA policy-making on race, but it is indisputably central to archaeo-identity that biological science has abandoned race. Bent on furthering the production of race in our midst, SAA will any day now begin to look like it is ignoring science, hurrying into an already dawning future while holding fast to discredited anti-science notions—even while its “white” membership has en masse forsaken the pleasures of white racial identity for the dignity of becoming former whites.

I believe that SAA has a public duty to explicitly reverse its commitment to making race. This means that SAA should resist efforts by racialists to impose a pro-race agenda upon the academic community; but in addressing race, SAA should refrain from interfering with the choice by individuals to embrace racial identity. Rather than combat race, academia must peacefully cultivate neutral ground, neither affirming race in a misguided anti-science way, nor opposing the ability of people to practice treasured belief systems. I make this sound simple, but it will no doubt require nuanced and complex engagement over time.

Members of SAA have options beyond what SAA can do. Each archaeologist can individually ponder what the doing and the undoing of race entails. As a matter of personal identity, the ambiguities of race require that we treat the making and remaking of racial identity as an ongoing art-form, not as an exact science. Any creative exploration of identity and culture will necessarily remain a mostly private affair, but I believe that SAA has a potential role in encouraging professional activities designed to promote useful introspection on race among its membership. Journal editors, for example, can raise useful questions with authors regarding the appropriate application of racial taxonomy and terminology.

Developing sincere and meaningful dialogue with racialists while resisting pro-race advocacy will not be easy for the academic community. In terms of relations with racial Indians, it is unfortunate that SAA has more notoriety than credibility on matters pertaining to racial Indianhood. Having aided in the perpetuation of race in American life for generations, and having expended much moral authority in recent years in clumsily alienating racial Indians on comparatively minor matters like NAGPRA and Kennewick Man, it will be

difficult—perhaps even impossible in the short-term—for SAA as an inclusive representative organization to effectively face the consequences of this history.

I guess I do not feel much pity for SAA. As a leading professional anthropology organization, SAA should look for ways to provide leadership in rethinking race. But I see no evidence of SAA taking action to curb the twisted unhistorical iniquities of race in archaeological practice. Quite the opposite is true. So feeling remorseless one day, I submitted to Kurt Dongoske the dialogue that opens this discussion, and Kurt took an interest and moved to place this pitiless discourse here before you all. Now it is time for you to ponder what must be done about race. Wicked SAA, den of racial iniquity, what will you do?

To help SAA answer the question of what should be done on race, Kurt Dongoske and Larry Zimmerman have gathered a range of contributions from a diverse group of scholars. These papers collectively articulate the complexity of race as a general topic in scholarship, but with some exceptions, most do little to clarify the specific problem at hand—that is, the problem of race as a discredited biological explanation of humankind and what this means for the traditional cultural practices of race in archaeology.

I have typically found it almost impossible to get academic scholars interested in directly tackling the race problem. Why is this? I do not know for sure. It certainly seems important that scientific scholarship has rejected race as a useful explanation of human biological diversity. Pondering this matter, I think back to my first years of doing what I term “wrestling with race.” It wasn’t very pretty. And it was personal. I must admit that my thinking then was shallow—I still don’t feel very confident about my ability to negotiate the deep end of the pool. It is no wonder that some scholars may feel nervous about plunging in for even a modest lap or two around this particular pool. I would guess that most academic scholars know that sticking with the status quo of extant racial practice is the wisest way to get plenty of status for your quo. Why stick your neck out on race?

For whatever reason, in the contributions at hand, we mostly encounter disquisitions on the traditional academic business of race. The wrestling is about such matters as racism, racial discrimination, white privilege, and the recent rise of Indigenous archaeology in contemporary archaeology. Very little guidance is offered for what to do about rethinking the ways we produce race. But if race is a cultural construction and not a useful biological description, shouldn’t we make it a priority to ponder what this means?

In Eldon Yellowhorn’s account of his career, we get some important insights into circumstances that will no doubt shape the coming dialogue—and here I mean the dialogue that has not yet materialized, but which will nevertheless come in time. I like the overall tone of what Yellowhorn says. He has earned a place of respect as one of the founding proponents of race-based “Indigenous archaeology.” Yellowhorn has helped to foster a progressive and growing engagement of racial Aboriginal people with archaeology in Canada, effectively bringing First Nation adherents to race together with white archaeologists. He wishes for a narrowing of the divide between the two groups. I like his thinking. It is essentially the kind of thinking that ultimately helped to take me down the path I have followed in my own professional life.

For Yellowhorn, however, it is a worthy professional agenda to have a racial identity and to ensure that members of his racial group have a meaningful voice in Canadian archaeology. Notably, there is no “wrestling” with racial identity as a cultural construction versus a biological one. Instead, someday there will be Aboriginal archaeologists working side-by-side with white archaeologists in Canada. Among Indigenous archaeology proponents in the United States, this multicultural model is also pervasive. Race is not questioned—pointed questioning enters the picture only when considering the way racial whites have set the historical agenda for archaeology. So when the future dawns, race itself will not be treated as a problem by proponents of indigenous archaeology. Indigenous archaeologists have no inclination to consider what it means that science has let go of race in the teachings of the academy. Race ought to continue to serve as an enduring biological truth. For members of SAA, this should serve as a powerful incentive to resist the impulse to redo the social project of the making of race in archaeology. Tinkering with race is okay, but if race-based Indigenous archaeology has its way, there will be no serious talk about redoing racialism.

Paul Mullins seeks to accomplish something quite interesting and quite complicated. Experimenting with conjoining the artificially distanced narratives of racial Indianhood and racial blackness, he explores territory that sounds important if we are to ever view race in its epic entirety. But he swiftly moves on to identify a question that truly interests him, advising us that “The key question in any scholarship of race is how differentiating rhetoric is used to leverage inequality...” This preferred focus on racism is only marginally related to the point of my Kennewickman dialogue. Racism is an important topic, for sure, but it is my intention to promote the idea that we should usefully broaden our race-talk to include discussion about what it means that race is a cultur-

al invention and not a biological reality. Mullins seems unconcerned with this point and instead stays focused on addressing race by confronting racism.

Mullins gets to a point that seems more sympathetic to my project on race when he suggests that he would like to see archaeology take a studied and nuanced approach to peering into the archaeological strata that pertain to race. He properly warns us that despite my point about race not being “real,” there is nevertheless a “genuine power” in the ideology of race, so we can indeed look for the outcomes of racialism in the sites where people have produced racial culture. This is a very useful point, but he misses something here.

Framing my internal private quest as a “Kennewickman dialogue,” I intentionally collide against the established notion that some kind of unspecified justification exists to interpret Kennewick Man in racial terms. SAA has invested much energy in making this claim. Mullins hopes for SAA to encourage archaeologists to take a nuanced and surgically precise look at the racialized elements of the archaeological record, but I suggest that SAA has instead deliberately elected to perform blunt-trauma anti-science racialism by urging us to see Kennewick Man as “Native American.” As a historian, I know that if SAA is right about Kennewick Man having race, then I can think of a few very good books on the history of race that need to be completely rewritten. Help me out, Paul Mullins... tell them to do race right!

I wish Mullins had more carefully grasped and characterized my arguments. He seems to think, for example, that my careful point about race as pseudobiology is somehow actually meant to suggest that the culture of race itself is not “real.” This is not my intended argument. The very real culture of race, I argue, is predicated upon the false notion that races are valid projections of the findings of science. The doing of race is real enough even if the sustaining ideas are false.

In the end, Mullins seems to advise SAA that it ought to do what it already does with race. That is, to study the outcomes of race in the archaeological record. In terms of racial Indianhood, archaeologists in America have spent many decades peering at what they believe to be evidences of racial culture lying around here and there inside the earth. In my view, SAA should follow the findings of science and history as a guide to looking for the presence of racial culture in the archaeological record, and SAA should stop the unwarranted making of race as a contemporary social project.

Carol McDavid wisely understands that my efforts to confront race are inherently personal. She describes herself as a

“white” archaeologist and she goes on to share some personal experiences with race in her life. This is a very moving gift. It is unusual in academic discourse on race. We need this kind of subjective storytelling because race only *visits* the objective footnotes of academic technical literature—race actually lives every day somewhere inside us where we spend time alone telling ourselves stories about what it means to be human. Academic America must do academic scholarship on race, but it is also necessary for all of us to confront race where it really lives.

I question Carol McDavid’s contention that she is “white.” It seems rude to do so, but perhaps this is an area of race-making that deserves what McDavid terms a “confrontation dance.” Race is certainly a manifold social reality, but I think I know perfectly well from personal experience what it is like to be racial, to do race. I know the feeling of affirming racial identity by attending Indian powwows, by socializing with Indians at Indian bars, by finding employment at an Indian law firm, by doing Indian history as a means of engaging in racial bonding, by working in a Native Arts Department, by implementing federal Indian law in order to promote the well-being of my racial group. Simply claiming an Indian identity is not enough; one must actively enact it. All adherents to racial Indianhood know this.

To support her claim to racial identity, I wonder whether Carol McDavid has actually spent any quality time as an adult actively affirming her alleged white identity by bonding with other whites through the practice of racial whiteness. Has she recently chosen to attend any kind of cultural event designed to explicitly aid with white bonding? Does she look for white bars where she can sip beers with racially selected white friends? Has she purposefully sought any employment situation aimed deliberately at white candidates? Does she do white scholarship as a way of bonding with other white people? Has she ever engaged in activities openly designed to promote the well-being of the white race? Has she lately bonded with other whites by laughing along with them at a racist joke?

Carol McDavid: you know racial whiteness from having seen it and having done it in your childhood. We both know what it is like to engage in the cultural production of race. Judging from the limited information in your personal account, I see no proof that you are white. To make your case, you rely only on the suggestion that you have been an inevitable beneficiary of an invisible empire of white privilege and structural white racism. Is this all you have to prop up your alleged racial credentials? In short, you stand accused of being a wannabe pseudo-racialist.

Carol McDavid implies that SAA ought to develop an awareness of the workings of white privilege and structural racism in archaeology. I think this well-meaning suggestion misdirects us away from something far more important: the fact that an ever-growing number of putative white people have actually abandoned racial identity. Carol McDavid's paper inadvertently contains a lot of direct evidence for this observation—evidence that she dismisses because it conflicts with her storytelling about white privilege. My framing of the present-day nature of racial whiteness is important because it means that it is possible to live without purposefully relying on race.

Carol McDavid could no doubt convince me of the importance of conducting a search for white privileging in American archaeology. But I am not inclined to join such a search-party when I feel a more pressing desire to hear her talk about the real non-racial Carol McDavid. We greatly need to hear about this real Carol McDavid who does not actually do white racial bonding. We will learn a lot from the real Carol McDavid who has successfully abandoned racial whiteness. If I am right in my assessment of Carol McDavid and her faux racial whiteness, this is hugely significant news; it deserves much analysis, much talk. I want to hear more. And this is important because an ever-growing number of so-called “white” archaeologists deserve a better explanation of what they really do and do not do with racial identity.

I have a personal stake here. We all do. I often go around saying I've given up race. Treating white privilege (and therefore racial privileging of every kind) as an inescapable routine condition of American life, we embrace the proposition that we cannot ever really escape race. We are trapped. If the critical race theorists are right about white privilege, we might as well stop our foolish criticism of the theory of race and resign ourselves to the chains of racialism forever. It does not matter that science tells us the truth about the lie of race, as McDavid concludes at the end of her paper. We should ignore all that stuff. Come on, everyone; let's tell them to just shut up about that!

I know what it is like to choose to not do race. For the moment it is not always an easy choice to make, but I think life can be lived without race. I see this happening all around me. We can unchain ourselves from the dehumanizing lie of race. So help us find ways to resist and reject race, Carol McDavid. I have given up racial Indianhood; and having done so, Carol McDavid, please do not force me into being white. Come on over here for a while, Carol McDavid. Let's be free. Over here we will be free of race. Free at last!

Well, I guess I might be somewhat of an idealist, but now we come to a practical-minded Ann Kakaliouras. She offers a wonderful contribution to the topic at hand. And yes I chuckled when I encountered her “is or was” joke. It was a relief to read something that made me smile and made me think. About six or eight years ago I read an online debate between George Gill and C. Loring Brace on the topic of race. I thought Gill's argument in favor of keeping race alive in biological anthropology was very weak. Brace kicked his ass.

Anyway, I am glad Ann Kakaliouras agreed to write something on race for this issue. I hope every SAA member reads it. SAA will see that their rich cousins down the hall actually have a thriving professional discourse on the production of race. They have debates; they spend time making race an issue—it is just too bad that this discourse appears so often in the form of latinized greekish techno-speak. They know many precisely chi-squared formulae for objectifying the doings of race, but they do not seem to know how to confront race where it really lives. For this we need storytelling. Conversations. It is subjective, race. It is not pretty, like a perfect graph. I guess this leaves plenty of room for much-needed Kennewickman-type dialogues about racialism. Learning from Ann Kakaliouras' insider portrayal of what goes on when those bio-types find themselves alone with their alleles, maybe the commoners at SAA need to panhandle a few bucks and get themselves a good discourse on race too.

In the end, whatever happens next, I presume that we must each wrestle with race at a very personal level. Technical anthropological literature has a role to play, but as Carol McDavid knows, we need personal storytelling about race. And we must each seek our own individual answers to the questions we encounter along the way. But we should not expect to find simple answers since race is such a complicated and deeply personal matter, deeply interwoven into the fabrics of American life and American archaeology. Somehow, I presume, this truth must usefully guide whatever happens next.