

WORKING TOGETHER ON RACE

THE VIEW FROM CANADA

Eldon Yellowhorn

Eldon Yellowhorn is an Associate Professor in the Department of Archaeology at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia.

Making the study of antiquity my career means that I automatically consider my research topics within the long duration of their existence. Taking this expansive view does tend to put things in perspective, as it offers the opportunity to ponder the observable changes and to take stock of what remains unresolved. That retrospection also influences the personal impressions I hold when looking at events in my life.

Despite the diversity that is endemic to modern society, talk of race and racialism can still incite heated discussion in polite company. The sociologist E.B. Reuter (1945:453) described the problem of race relations as “isolated from the confused reality of common-sense experience and defined objectively and abstractly.” Perhaps for such reason, sixty-plus years later it is still a burr in our collective craw. While some might regard it as an abstraction, for members of a visible minority there is nothing abstract about race. It is literally “in your face.” Yet from the vantage point of my experience I can recognize some milestones that signify progress in race relations in society, but especially within the archaeological milieu.

When I first got involved with the Canadian Archaeological Association (CAA) in the early 1980s, I was an undergraduate student and I attended mostly out of curiosity. I listened to the papers that were presented and I got to know their authors. However, I also noticed that Aboriginal people, or any minority for that matter, were conspicuous by their absence. I do not exaggerate in stating that I was the diversity at some meetings. By the time I reached graduate school, Aboriginal people were discovering their interest in archaeology. Most attended out of a desire to know what researchers were saying, some were there because settling land claims had meant taking responsibility for heritage sites, and a few were there because they had chosen to make it their careers. We started to make our presence felt almost immediately because our attendance coincided with changes then taking place in the larger society.

I participated in many of these events, but I never thought of them as milestones at the time. However, upon retrospection they stand out because of their singular quality. I began taking an active part in the association while I was a graduate student in the early 1990s. Research ethics was then a looming matter and the CAA decided to articulate a statement of best practices when liaising with Aboriginal people. I co-chaired the committee that had the task of gathering the concerns of stakeholders and then drafting the text to be presented to our members. Our final draft was discussed at the annual meeting in 1994 and by open vote was adopted by the membership. This marked the first time that the association formally acknowledged the unique connection between Aboriginal people and the archaeological record. Since then First Nations have become active partners in research and the trend has been toward cooperative efforts, collaborative research, and disseminating information to affected audiences. Involving aboriginal communities in all aspects of the research protocol is now standard practice on projects that directly affect them.

When I organized the first session of Aboriginal archaeologists at a CAA meeting in 1997, I witnessed the interest it generated because of its novelty. Back then there were no professionals who could provide direction or advice to students with Native ancestry, but we were a dedicated, cohort and we were preparing to engage the profession by attaining all the recognizable credentials required. Together our efforts made a difference as we brought some parity for Aboriginal people into the profession, but only because we chose this career path. Many of the participants in that session are still active in archaeology as museum curators, consultants, and civil servants, while others now pursue their interests elsewhere. Moreover, it signified that they were not content to be mere observers of archaeological work, nor passive consumers of the explanations constructed for the material recovered during excavations. A new generation of Aboriginal students is now present in graduate school, some of whom I supervise, and my personal experience tells me that

they are motivated by the mantra of providing a service to their communities.

While there was a willingness to recruit Aboriginal people as faculty, filling vacant positions proved more difficult because the personnel were not in place. However, that situation is being corrected. In 2002, I swapped my student career for that of an assistant professor and began to train people whose career path intersected with mine. Through my research agenda and by supervising graduate students, archaeology will see more diversity in its ranks. Although I take a special interest in training Aboriginal students, I regularly recruit, supervise and support students from many backgrounds. Now that I am a professor of archaeology, I can look back on the mileposts that line my journey and take some satisfaction that I made a contribution to the discipline.

When I attended the most recent national meeting in 2009 in Thunder Bay, Ontario, I noticed that Aboriginal people were conspicuous because of their presence. Some came to report on projects in their communities, some were students presenting the results of their research, and some were professionals working in universities and museums. A Cree elder blessed the conference at the banquet. Just this year I was elected president of the CAA. Forty years ago at its first conference, Canadian archaeologists could not imagine such a scenario. This causes me to imagine what things will look like in forty more years.

Looking to the Future

While writing of indigenous perspectives on archaeology, Joe Watkins explained that the history of archaeology was one of the reasons Aboriginal people viewed it “through wary eyes” (Watkins 2005), due to its association with colonialist policies that used scientific explanations to make hegemonic, imperialist goals the natural order (Horsman 1975). Philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries presented their speculation on the inequality among the races as science and used archaeological data to impress this idea on the public (Bieder 1981). Well into the era of processual archaeology, professionals still tended to uphold those negative stereotypes and implicitly interpreted their data to portray Native Americans as unprogressive, unchanging people. The practice of disregarding the human labor that formed the artifact further estranged scientific archaeology from the people whose ancestors were the subject of scrutiny (Trigger 1980).

Considering such baggage, the observation by Joseph C. Winter that “Indians and archaeologists have a unique rela-

tionship” (1980:121) may seem an understatement now, but at the time it acknowledged a changing tide. Until Aboriginal people entered the conversation about their heritage, archaeologists were comfortable with their soliloquy about ancient times. In retrospect the adversarial relationship that defined those early years can be regarded as the growing pains of a maturing dialogue. Nearly three decades into this relationship, Aboriginal people have moved beyond protest to fully embrace the potential of archaeology. Its appeal comes from its methods for extracting history from unwritten sources, in this case material culture, since writing is a linguistic device that has little time depth for most Native cultures. Therefore, searching for our history leads us to our oral traditions and the artifacts we find.

When Native archaeologists use their research to interpret their data, they are very conscious of their internalist perspective and they want to imagine the past through their cultural knowledge (Yellowhorn 2006). They can take this approach with the full understanding that archaeology offers a bundle of methods that aid our investigations, and that appropriating them does not entail accepting the theorizing prevalent in the mainstream. Defining their objectives might build on a narrative that emanates from their culture’s perspective on antiquity. While general explanations are not anathema to them, serving the community might be a laudable goal for their research. I speak from my own experience in my historical archaeology project on the Piikani First Nation, which is my home community. Residents there are not concerned with the big questions about the peopling of the Americas or the genetic markers that tie us to Africa. Their expectations orbit their local environment. They wish to know how our ancestors made the transition to farming reserve land after the buffalo went extinct in our homeland. My contribution to the community is to construct a history that triangulates data from archaeological, archival, and oral history sources to make some statements about how our identity took its modern contours. In the process I hope to overcome the adversarial image of archaeology by demonstrating its potency with new insights about our traditions.

I do not wish to appear too naïve; I know that we are far from the ideals that give us inspiration because the current situation is not perfect. However, there are enough milestones behind us that give us cause for hope. Together they support the conclusion that the divide between archaeologists and Indians is growing narrower. My goal is to use my position as a professor to grow the talent pool for archaeology so that Native communities can rely on their own expertise. In the

↳ YELLOWHORN, *continued on page 9*

Sorry, Kennewickman! In the end, if Indigenous Archaeology does anything in the world, it would be nice if it stood for something more than loyalty to the precepts of racial Indianhood—it should stand for a bridge that unites us all, and it should stand for the end of SAA's balancing act. I think it can begin to do that if it starts with the truth about race.

Oh, but the racialisists among them don't much like your version of the truth, S&S. They have their own truths to pursue.

Their truths will lock them into SAA's eternally ugly balancing act, and move everyone down the polarizing racial bridge to nowhere.

Maybe race will win in the end. Maybe it'll be a forever kind of thing.

Maybe. But maybe we can at least aim at really redefining race as culture, at discarding the biological basis of it, at encouraging Chicken Nuggets to take pride in his cultural Indianness! Can't we do that?

No. Because under the rules of race, we don't have a choice—

the racial colonialistic truth is an imposed truth, not optional. Colonialistic race is way too much sad crazy fun!

Are you okay with the thought of keeping your new racial identity forever?

Sure! It's a gasgasgas! A whole lotta buncha jumpin' jack flash!

Kennewickman... what are you doing with that spike?

Come here, S&S! I'll make you lafflafflaff at my new funfun-funnybones!

No!

Yes! Here it comes, S&S! Race is dead! Long live race!

No! ...ha!

Yes!

n... n... ha-ha! ...Yes! Race is... LONG LIVE RACE!

That's right! Now, come here, SAA!

Get 'em right in the forehead, Kennewickman! Ha-ha-ha!

I'll police that balancing act for you, SAA!

Yes! We'll police them all! Race is such a scream!

C'mon everyone, scream! scream! scream!

YELLOWHORN, from page 15 ↩

longer term I see a need to train cultural mediators to be expert witnesses to aid in litigation over land claims or challenges over cultural patrimony. Moreover, there are demographic changes taking place in our multicultural society that will alter loyalty to the historical narrative of the Indian and the White man. We are reaching a time when Aboriginal people are a growing population, while the majority is shrinking. Within the next few decades, minorities will be the majority. Fewer people will find their historical roots in the clash of cultures chronicled by historians of colonial America. When no dominant culture holds the power to structure the message, and as more voices contribute to public discourse, the need for Aboriginal people to rely on their own experts might become more crucial.

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