50 VOICES

Conscientious archaeologies

Brit Asmussen[a,b,c]

aQueensland Museum, Brisbane, Australia; bARC Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia; cAdjunct Senior Research Fellow, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Introduction

Over several decades, there have been ongoing developments in the operation of many aspects of Australian archaeology, including working in deeper ways with First Nations peoples. How do practitioners build on this to cultivate honourable and collaborative engagements spanning all aspects of practice? Here I write wearing two hats—as a taphonomist interested in developing research methods, and as a museum curator. Experiences in both roles, and recent changes in the latter, have shaped the views on the ongoing practical work that needs to be done as a practitioner in the face of sometimes confounding institutional structures and practices. Here 'First Nations' is used to reflect the diversity of Australia's First Peoples; 'Peoples' is used when specifically referring to First Nations Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups; and 'Community' is used to refer to non-First Nations groups. Best practices that apply to First Nations engagements also apply to non-First Nations communities and groups.

Methods and interpretations

One significant taphonomic and methodological challenge remains to reduce the distances between the biased, fragmented and taphonomically modified archaeological objects, and the dynamic, sophisticated, socio-culturally, ecologically and politically complex lives that Peoples led (and still lead). Here, we can recognise that methods are not always neutral, and they are a legitimate site of decolonisation and debate. The dominance of Western scientific expertise now requires us to consider this expertise anew, interrogate the underlying assumptions of methods, methodologies, and the underpinnings that inform interpretations. Not only can we share the how and why of the archaeological methods we use, we can work with Peoples to lead with First Nations methods and methodologies, and/or work to codevelop methods which better engage with a codesigned research approach. Here, we can recognise that methods and outcomes can be a site of acknowledged codesign and collaboration, and increase their social utility. We can continue to decolonise pan-continental explanatory model-making, as we appreciate that specific accounts of specific places on Country are appropriate from a First Nations perspective.

Partnerships

A core challenge is to find ways of working in genuine collaborative partnerships. There are some proven strategies that can be adopted. Those in institutional structures can provide explicit recognition of the ongoing processes and effects of colonisation, while being cognisant of significant issues in the history of academic research for Peoples and Communities and improve how research systems operate today for people. They can place First Nations- and Community-led and designed work at the forefront, or models which are genuinely codesigned, comanaged, and codelivered. They can be guided by ethical frameworks (e.g. AIATSIS 2020; Australia Council 2019) advocating for Peoples' self-determination and leadership, and for sustainability, accountability and ongoing informed consent. They can recognise there are continuing responsibilities which may extend beyond the lifespan of a project. They can seek to undertake work in culturally appropriate ways, resist seizing control, creating space for articulation, deep listening and respecting cultural processes. They can make the research available and discoverable by those involved in policy-making so that it can make positive contributions outside the purely academic realm.

Some key questions that can ground practitioner engagement include: Why are they partnering? Who

is this research for? Who should they partner with? How will they partner? What is the purpose? What are the outcomes? What interdisciplinary collaborations are required to provide different questions and broader perspectives? What about data sovereignty and intellectual property? How can partnering in major funding initiatives be a catalyst to driving self-identified needs of partners? Can/should the work directly impact socially relevant government/political agendas and policy engagement to enhance Peoples' wellbeing (e.g. caring for Country, stewardship of biota, climate change, health, education)?

Overall, there is a need to develop cultural competency, be alert to issues of cultural safety, consider the impacts of work for People and Community today, consider reciprocity, to make sure the work is relevant, gives back positively, embeds opportunities for capacity-building, and speaks to and delivers on contemporary concerns and issues.

Representation, visibility, foregrounding, reclamation

The tangible legacies of research partnerships can be diverse. Academic outcomes are mostly represented by journal articles reporting research. Here, there is an opportunity to demonstrate partnerships more transparently by including the direct voices of People as knowledge holders, intellectual property owners, research collaborators and interpreters (conducted with consent and understanding of individual or group rights to speak for things and knowledge). Publications can actively foreground the research agendas of First Nations collaborators and acknowledge innovative contributions to research, to write (with permission and collaboration) using words from language, and the incorporation of First Nations' voice, perspectives and interpretations, providing lead authorship, and prioritising text passages representing different knowledge systems and phenomenological accounts.

Here, those in institutional structures can look towards more direct First Nations' interpretation and reclamation of objects, stories, interpretation and meaning regarding the tangible and the intangible. This approach would not only enrich but empower, help to understand different Peoples' histories and identities, and overcome issues concerning privileging of knowledge and structural inequalities in research and papers, and the effect of deficit discourses. Projects can better support outcomes for First Nations and Community researchers, and support and amplify their contributions. Without this, there is a danger of talking past collaborators, rather than listening, learning, and advancing. There is an opportunity to create space

more actively for People to be recognised, respected, to talk to each other in the pages of the journal, and to tell non-Indigenous peoples their truths. Perhaps inclusivity and diversity, reflected by representation in leadership positions and advisors within the formal structure of archaeology journals themselves and executive levels will assist this.

Legacy and archives

Partners can be more fully positioned as the end users of research. This means, from the start of projects, that practitioners need to be respectful allies and to build-in benefit-sharing and broader First Nations and Community outcomes. This involves considering the end products of research partnerships—considering data curation, returning (repatriating) information, data, objects and collections (physical, photographic, digital etc.); building in codesign and development of software and websites as an outcome of projects; and enabling data governance and sovereignty. It also includes designing into projects non-traditional academic outcomes, which can be provided to community at the end of the project, such as collateral for small displays in keeping places or community centres, exhibitions, catalogues, storybooks and cultural and tourism guides, which provide community support and tangible legacy outcomes. It may also include aspects which increase cultural capital, capacity and entrepreneurship. Discussions with partners will enable these kinds of non-academic community outcomes to be mobilised via their being built into projects, with future opportunities identified as research progresses.

Contemporary life, politics and social impact

Practitioners need to address the political climates in which they practise.

> Aboriginal archaeology … has a tendency to disassociate deep time traces of the past from Aboriginal contemporary politics and aspirations … What use are the fundamentally incomplete and truncated fragments of the past not behind us, but ahead (Brown 2012:123).

These words still have relevance, particularly when we think about significant aspects of contemporary life: Makarrata, the Uluru Statement from the Heart, Voice, Path to Treaty, Truth-Telling and Healing Inquiry, self-determination, cultural and intellectual property rights, the [Queensland] *Human Rights Act 2019*, and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to name a few. These themes are already positively impacting and reshaping the museum sector,

resulting in reconsiderations of and fundamental changes in practice, structures and power. Is there a place for Australian archaeology to become more relevant to and for Peoples and engage with fundamental human rights issues? How can the discipline engage in more socially/politically just and adept work? How can it grow and be a safe place for ideas and representation? Working in partnership, how can participants examine the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation on Peoples and facilitate truth-telling and healing? How can practitioners empower these dialogues?

Conclusion

The future is hard to predict, but it is likely to see a growing diversity of contextually sensitive practices and engagements, increasingly led and managed by First Nations Peoples. How can practitioners enable, facilitate and support this change honourably, with best practise, as allies? They can start by partnering to share skills, methods, datasets, training, increasing Peoples and Community visibility and representation, amplifying diverse perspectives, being accountable, respectful and providing support where they can give it. This requires conscientious efforts to think and practise different ways of doing archaeology in tandem with new standards and developments, and consider our diverse impacts for Peoples past, present and future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Brit Asmussen http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8443-1892

References

AIATSIS 2020 *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Australia Council 2019 *Protocols for Using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts*. Pyrmont: Australia Council for the Arts.

Brown, S. 2012 Review of 'The Dark Abyss of Time: Archaeology and Memory' by Laurent Olivier. *Australian Archaeology* 75:122–123