

Researching “People Without History”: Challenges and Rewards

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The University of Denver’s vision to become “a great private university dedicated to the public good” requires some significant retooling in how we support and evaluate the traditional triumvirate of faculty work: teaching, research, and service. In fulfilling this vision we’ll certainly need to address the topic of diversity and inclusiveness as these values pertain to the research enterprise, or what we might call—following Ernest Boyer—the “scholarship of discovery”. What obstacles and opportunities are associated with working with, or for, different groups? Indeed, this is a challenge for all disciplines given the post-colonial critique of scholarly business-as-usual, and the by-now well-established case that multiculturalism benefits all Boyerian scholarships; not only of discovery, but also of teaching, application, integration, and engagement.

The challenge of inclusion is especially big in my particular field of archaeology. Here in the United States archaeology is a branch of anthropology. Anthropologists have been studying human diversity for a long time. We’re pretty good at understanding the nature and sources of that diversity, both biological and cultural. But as archaeologists we’re a little more culturally-challenged when it comes to dealing with actual living people. Archaeology has always been a white, middle-class discipline, written by and for that class. For example, studies of glossy, popular magazines like *National Geographic* and *Archaeology* (Figures 1, 2) indicate readerships that are 60 percent college degreed, with 80 percent employed as professional

administrators and managers (McGuire and Walker 1999). Consequently, archaeological

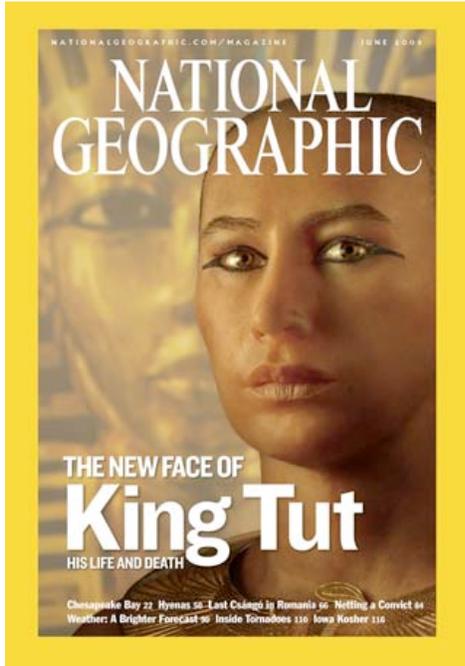


Figure 1.

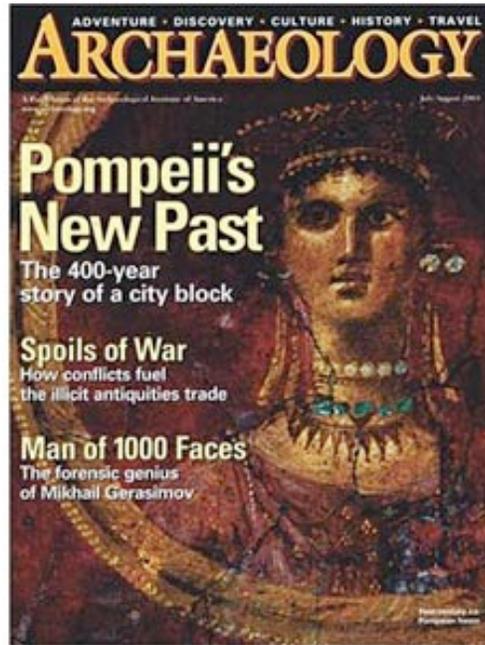


Figure 2.

accounts of the past often reflect middle-class anxieties and concerns about population size, climate change, energy shortages, and so on.

But things are changing today, and changing rapidly. Globalization has produced an expansion of archaeology's audience beyond the middle class. It has done so in ways not entirely comfortable for those working in the discipline's mainstream. Many historically marginalized groups—such as indigenous peoples subjugated by colonialist empires, or the descendants of African slaves and working class immigrants—are taking an interest in archaeology. The great American anthropologist Eric Wolf described these groups as “People Without History” (Wolf 1982). These are folks who have been left out of our grand historical narratives because their cultures are assumed to be static and unchanging. These history-less people are aware of archaeology's class position and historical ties to colonialist projects. They're putting pressure on archaeologists to write pasts that acknowledge the humanity and creativity of the ancestors, and that incorporate “traditional” knowledge and voices into those

narratives. Archaeologists are thus being called upon to better justify their existence, as well as the criteria they use for privileging some understandings of the past over others.

The message, then, is that American archaeologists need to better engage with everyone who has an interest in the past. Given the demographic changes that are projected for American society—involving great increases in minority populations, especially those of Hispanic descent—the future of archaeology and indeed all other historical sciences may depend upon better engagements with difference. In this paper I want to talk about the form that this engagement has taken in my own research career. I want to share the challenges and rewards of doing an archaeology of, and for, the living. My “clients”, if you will, include indigenous peoples of the American Southwest and working class citizens of southeastern Colorado. I’m interested in building relationships with these groups as a way to help them tell their stories. But I’m also interested in learning something of how Western scholarships of discovery can be enriched and democratized by what we typically refer to as “other ways of knowing”. Indeed, I think it’s in the flows coming from “other” to “us” that the greatest rewards can be found.

Working in Indian Country

I was introduced to the challenges of navigating between different cultures and histories shortly after arriving at DU in 1988. In the 1990s I ran archaeological field schools on private land near the Zuni Indian Reservation in west-central New Mexico (Figure 3). Although not on the reservation, the 13th century pueblo sites we worked were clearly ancestral Zuni, given their

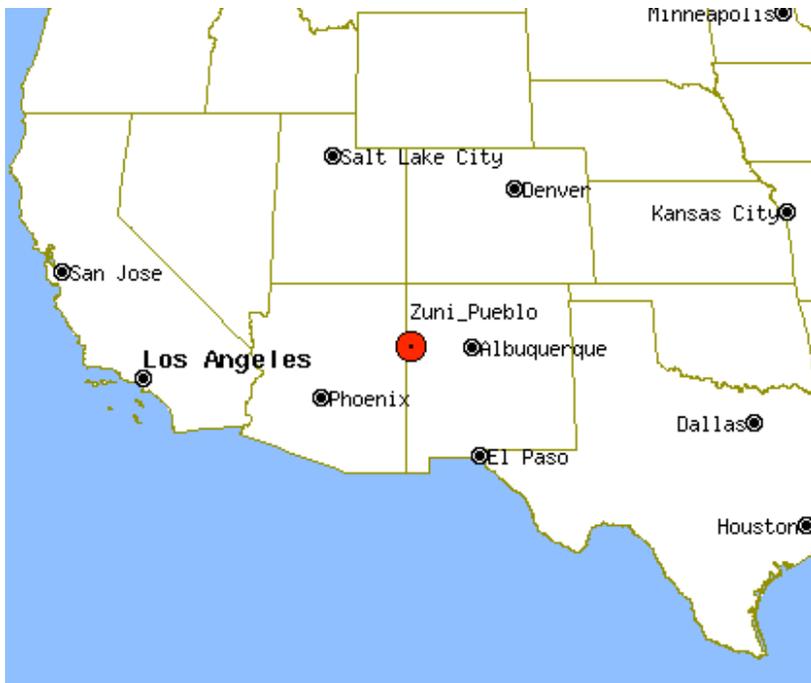


Figure 3.

architecture and pottery (Figures 4, 5). Our challenge was to balance respect for the material



Figure 4



Figure 5.

remains of Ancestral Zuni culture with the demands of contemporary Anglo landowners who had very definite ideas about what they wanted to know about the archaeological resources on their property.

It turned out that the Zuni were relatively easy to please. The Tribe has its own on-reservation archaeology program, so they're not much concerned about off-reservation work. But they're still interested, since the traditional Zuni land use area extends well beyond the reservation. We sought as both a political and ethical matter to keep the tribe informed of everything that we did, including submitting regular fieldwork reports.

The rub was our Anglo hosts. These were generous people with a deep interest in the past, but they had a rather “pornographic” view of archaeological resources—the kind of view that's encouraged by *National Geographic* and the other glossy popular magazines (and I say that with all fondness for *National Geographic*!). They were keen on finding nice ceramic pots, which in turn meant pressure to locate human burials (Figure 6), even though our research designs didn't require their discovery. Grave-finding in general is not an activity that's much



Figure 6.

appreciated by Indians, whether on their land or someone else's. Our dilemma was also complicated by NAGPRA—the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. NAGPRA is a 1990 law that mandates the protection of Indian graves and the repatriation of already-excavated sacred objects from museums and research centers. In the 1990s DU's anthropology museum was a regional leader in spearheading NAGPRA compliance. So, these institutional commitments loomed over our work in Zuniland. The one burial that we did find was by accident, a young child eroding from an arroyo that had widened to take out part of a small block of pueblo rooms (Figure 7). In keeping with Zuni wishes, we treated the excavation



Figure 7.

of this child as a salvage operation. We excavated and promptly reburied the child with all of the surrounding soil and associated objects.

Eventually the balancing act with our clients ended when, in the late 1990s, the Zuni tribal council's thinking about archaeology shifted a bit more to the right, enough to where excavation of any kind on off-reservation sites was unwelcome. We turned briefly to archaeological survey—finding sites on the surface—and very limited test excavation. There are limits, however, to how far one can understand ancient society with these methods and, besides, simply locating and mapping sites is just not that appealing to students who themselves have likely been raised on a steady diet of “artifact porn”. So, we pulled the plug on the Zuni work largely out of deference to the Zuni tribe, even though it was a big disappointment to our client landowners.

But we didn't leave Indian Country before we learned something important from the natives about how to better integrate different ways of knowing the past. The context for these lessons were some regional conferences on NAGPRA compliance sponsored by the National Park Service and held at Fort Lewis College (Duke 1999). At these conferences I learned that while native peoples are concerned about getting history right, they're not very interested in how the resulting truths can contribute to Western science, or some grand synthetic historical narrative. Instead, they're concerned about what history means for how they live, and for how they live today. One indigenous scholar from Santa Clara Pueblo has framed the issue in the following way: the Pueblo Indian's primary concern is with “the larger issues of breathing and dying”, rather than with the specific details of knowing that focus scientific world views (Naranjo 1995). Other native participants in the conferences echoed this view where they indicated that history is less important than political, economic, and cultural survival. Native American scholars of Anishinaabe descent even have a word for such an approach. It's called, simply enough, “survivance” (Vizenor 1999).

It subsequently occurred to us that indigenous survivance values are at odds with typical Western ways of knowing in which a normative, criterial rationality rules the day; that is, where the validity of a knowledge-claim depends upon the “preponderance of evidence” used to evaluate it. In archaeology such preponderance is not that easy to determine, given the uneven quality of our data and the contentiousness of other supporting lines of evidence, such as native oral traditions (which can be enlightening but also deeply politicized accounts of history). So, a normative criterial rationality is perhaps not that helpful if the goal is to put dead souls to rest and living minds at ease—which I understand to be the fundamental aim of NAGPRA legislation. Instead, NAGPRA goals might be better served by a more critical rationality that includes the consequences of knowledge-claims for everyday life: for how we want to live, and for the building of a genuinely pluralist community characterized by mutual understanding and respect. There are sources for such a rationality in the Western philosophical tradition, specifically American pragmatism. In contrast to the mainstream scientific view where competing ideas are tested against each other in light of the empirical record, pragmatism stipulates that we test the ideas of other cultures by “weaving” them together with ones we already have (Rorty 1991). Testing is a matter of interweaving and continually reweaving webs of belief so as to increasingly expand and deepen community and, perhaps, create new fields of understanding and possible action (Rouse 2003). It seemed to me that there was a resonance here with indigenous “survivance” epistemologies that could be usefully exploited for its integrative value. Such a view is beginning to gain some traction in American archaeology. (Saitta 2003).

Long story short, this perceived convergence between indigenous and Western world views around a set of critical, pragmatic values led us to develop the ideas with a native scholar

from Zia Pueblo. Our contribution to a University of Calgary conference volume on *Indigenous Peoples and Archaeology* (Saitta, Duke, and Gachupin 2003) suggested an alternative pragmatic approach to NAGPRA compliance that broke with the various positivisms and postmodernisms that often polarize discussion of these, and many other, academic issues. Other scholars have been doing the same, and it remains to be seen where this kind of approach will go. My main point here is that our time in Indian country brought some ideas together for me about how we might approach collaboration with the diverse “other”. We need to be willing to rethink the usual normative criteria—that is, empirical and logical sufficiency—for judging and integrating knowledge-claims. We perhaps need to rethink what it means to “test” knowledge-claims and, without getting too deep into the hermeneutics, to explore the utility of other metaphors like “weaving” and “fitting”. We need to be prepared to make compromises, especially if we’re part of the majority faction in historical science that has had things its own way for too long. As Richard Rorty—sometimes described as America’s greatest living philosopher—notes, “in democratic societies you often get things done by compromising principles in order to form alliances with groups about whom you have grave doubts” (Rorty 1998). I’ve found that there are ways of building such alliances that don’t require compromising core explanatory goals or breaking faith with any of the epistemological or ethical principles that make for good scientific practice.

Working with Descendant Communities at Ludlow

These pragmatist commitments have also come in handy in another research project that filled the gap created by our departure from Zuniland. In 1997 we began work at the Ludlow Massacre Memorial in southeastern Colorado, a National Historic Register site that, with any luck, will soon be designated as a National Historical Landmark (Figure 8). Ludlow is the place



Figure 8.

just north of Trinidad where Colorado Militia, in a last ditch effort to break a long and rancorous 1914 coal strike, raided and burned a striker's tent colony killing men, women, and children in the process (Figures 9, 10). The colonists were recent immigrants to the United States, of largely



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

Eastern European and Mexican descent. The event is considered part of the “hidden history” of the West. In other words, it’s not discussed much in textbooks, and 70% of the visitors to the Memorial expect to learn about an event in the American Indian Wars; e.g., something like Sand Creek or Little Big Horn. They’re mighty surprised to learn that Ludlow is a major event in American Labor Wars. The scholarly literature doesn’t contain much on how the Ludlow workers lived and died. It focuses primarily on famous people who were part of the events—for example, the great industrialist John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and the great labor activist Mary “Mother” Jones—and the most dramatic events themselves. Our goal was to flesh out and better publicize this story, and learn something of the lives of ordinary people, by doing archaeological excavation of the tent colony and associated mining camps. This was also a chance to conduct research that was directly relevant to issues in the contemporary American workplace (most notably safety conditions in America’s coal mines—recall the deadly 2006 disasters in Sago,

West Virginia and Holmes Mill, Kentucky) and of course the national debate about immigration. Because of these various foci, we were generously supported by eight years of funding from the Colorado Historical Society.

In beginning this work we discovered that working class Anglos and minorities, like native peoples, have never had much use for archaeology or mainstream history. This was brought forcefully home when I first visited the Trinidad community to ask for permission to work at the site. I was invited to speak to the United Mine Workers of America, the owners of the Ludlow site, at a meeting of Union Local 9856 one Sunday morning in June, 1997. After waiting alone for nearly three hours in the meeting hall foyer, I was invited into the meeting room as the last item of business. I dutifully laid out the scientific rationale for the project, including how the work would expand and deepen our knowledge of Colorado history. When I finished, this one old guy looked at me point blank and said (and I paraphrase for polite company): “Sonny, I can tell you all you need to know about the Ludlow Massacre in three words: they got [screwed]”. Period. End of story. The alienation and hostility apparent in this statement threw me for a loop. It was a wake-up call concerning the realities of working class life and thought, and it also threw into question the wider social value of a fundamentally middle-class discipline like archaeology. Indeed, it challenged the very basis of “business as usual” scholarship...a challenge not unlike the one we were presented in Indian Country. Certainly, it’s a comment that underscores the need for academics to begin producing knowledge with their various publics.

We got the union local’s support, but the gulf between academic and working class cultures in our research area remained palpable. A key to narrowing the cultural gulf has been to appreciate that Ludlow and other coalfield sites are part of a living history and long

commemorative tradition, and considered sacred ground by the descendants of miners who lived and died there. Another key is to respect the orienting power of vernacular histories. Vernacular histories are local histories that derive from the first-hand, everyday experience of those people who were directly involved with history's events (Bodnar 1992). Vernacular histories are “passed around the kitchen table.” They convey what social reality feels like rather than what it is, or should be, like. Thus, vernacular histories are selective, exaggerated, and clearly partisan (Figure 11). Vernacular histories in southern Colorado emphasize the militia's role in starting

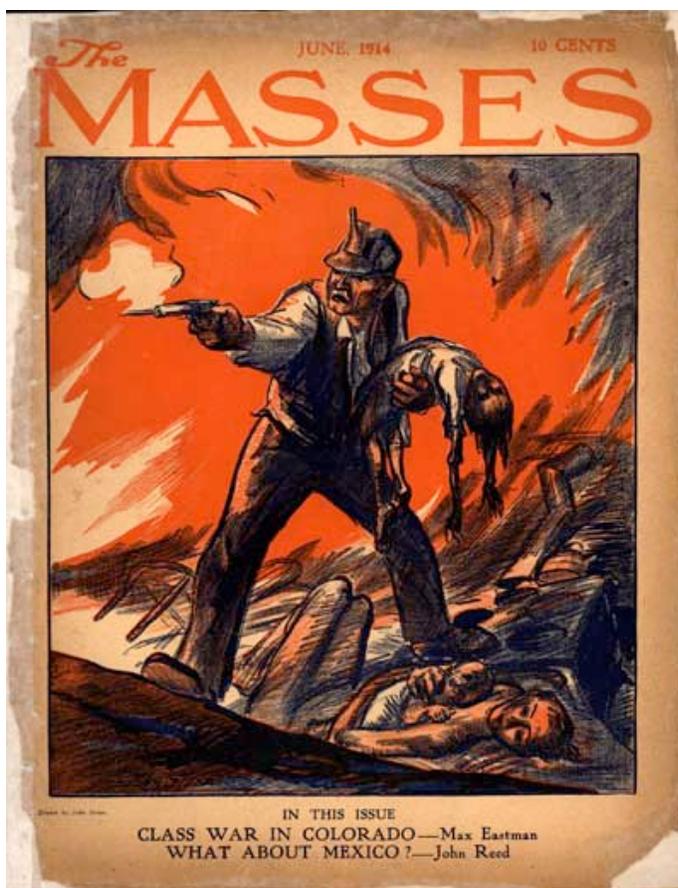


Figure 11.

the shooting that led to the massacre. They implicate the militia in many more atrocities against colonists on the day of the massacre, and count many more casualties in the conflict. Many vernacular accounts, for example, maintain that the Colorado Militia used explosive bullets in their assault on the tent colony. They also suggest that the number of colonists killed in the

massacre was far higher than reported in the history books—orders of magnitude higher—and that the Militia had dumped these bodies into mass graves on the Colorado prairie.

At same time we were squeezed by the champions of official history, especially those with no love for our trade union supporters. Official histories of the American West are nationalist, progressive, and triumphal (Bodnar1992). They emphasize social unity and continuity. They gloss over periods of transformation and rupture, or spin those ruptures as always having produced a better society, “a more perfect union.” Trinidad town boosters have traditionally embraced this kind of history. Institutions of cultural production in southern Colorado privilege a particular set of memories that emphasize the area’s place in romantic, mythic narratives of the “Old West.” Specifically, Trinidad celebrates its status as a rest stop on the Santa Fe Trail where wagon trains would pause to recoup before heading into New Mexico. Rugged individualism, frontier conquest, and national progress are the dominant themes of this official history. It’s a history of Kit Carson, Bat Masterson, and other assorted cowboys, sheriffs, and pioneers. It is a history that, through Hollywood myth-making, has attained considerable global appeal (Figure 12).



Figure 12.

So, our challenge in southeastern Colorado has been to navigate not only between different ethnic groups and subcultures, but also between vernacular and official histories. I think that we've been pretty successful in meeting this challenge. The scholarship informed by

the archaeological work (Figures 13, 14) is effectively producing new knowledge of coal field

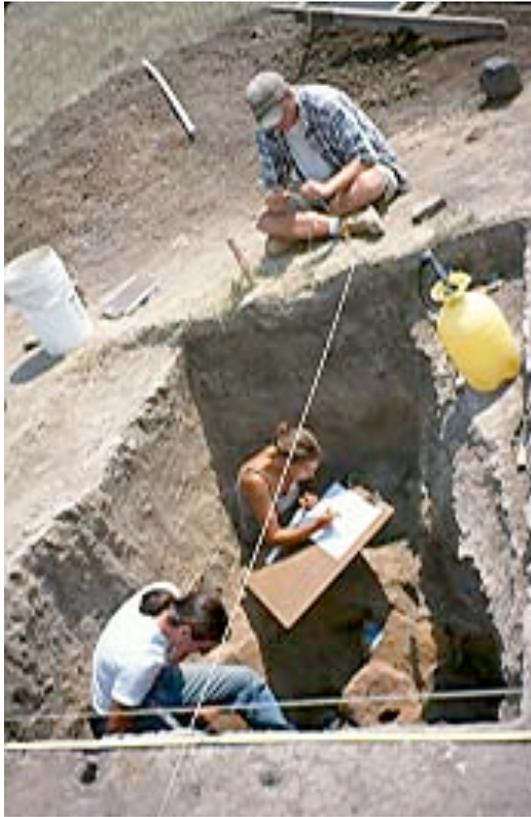


Figure 13. Excavation of Tent Cellar.



Figure 14. Ground Penetrating Radar Survey.

events that show where both vernacular and official accounts of the past go wrong (Saitta 2007). We've found no mass graves on the prairie, but also no evidence that striking miners were armed to the teeth as reported by militia officers during post-massacre Congressional inquests. Our Colorado Humanities institutes for training teachers in labor history—the project's key K-12

educational initiative—include artists, novelists, and poets on the belief that creative work can represent historical truth in ways that scholarly research never can. Finally, our public interpretive work—an element that distinguishes our project from many others nationally—has been particularly effective in bridging cultures, histories, and academic disciplines. In June 2006 we installed a 12 panel interpretive trail at the Ludlow Memorial site (Figure 15) that better details the Ludlow drama and shows how archaeology can enrich and correct the written history.



Figure 15.

Other historical markers and traveling exhibits (figures 16, 17) recognize the role played by Colorado's immigrants in the making of the Industrial West.



Figure 16.



Figure 17.

These interpretive materials do useful work in providing counter-classic narratives to balance the triumphal, mythic narratives that have long informed Western public history. They've been created with major input from local citizens, who invariably urge a strong connection between the labor struggle that precipitated the Ludlow Massacre and labor struggles in contemporary America. The locals are concerned that Ludlow not be consigned to a dead past, something that archaeological research at the site might suggest. Upon viewing excavated artifacts Yolanda Romero, president of UMWA Local 9856 Women's Auxiliary commented that:

“Until now, we've only known what we've seen in photographs. But to see a real thing, an item that a person actually handled, really brings those people and that time to life...workers today are still fighting for some of the same protections the Ludlow miners wanted. People should know how far we've come and how far we still have to go”

(UMWJ 1999:13)

We also haven't been bashful about joining the unionist cause in southern Colorado, even at the risk of having our scholarly detachment impugned. We're regular participants at the annual June memorial service to honor the Ludlow martyrs. This is an occasion for union leaders and politicians to address contemporary social issues and to wave the union flag (Figure 18). We join them on the podium to update our work and to promote thinking about the



Figure 18.

relationship between past and present. In 2005, I presented gifts of framed posters to several key community leaders as a way to thank them for their support (Figure 19). The posters advertised



Figure 19.

an exhibit about Ludlow that was mounted in the anthropology department's Sturm Hall museum gallery in the fall of 2004. As a result of this and other efforts to publicize the story of Ludlow we've been embraced by the local community, with union leaders seeing us as "brothers and sisters" in the struggle for workplace justice. Although such reactions to the work raise suspicions about our scholarly objectivity, they're professionally and personally fulfilling. They suggest that we've had some success in building a distinctive archaeology for the living, and in strengthening the status of archaeology as a meaningful contributor to public discourse and debate. Certainly, they indicate that we've pretty successfully overcome that initial, unnerving mix of local suspicion, bewilderment, and antagonism that first greeted us when we sought to begin our work in the coal fields.

Conclusion

In this paper I've laid out some of the challenges and rewards that accompany a research enterprise that seeks to engage cultural difference or "otherness." In both Indian Country and Coal Country we've discovered that what really matters for many of our community collaborators and clients—especially those living on the margins—is how the truths of history connect to contemporary life and cultural survival. It's important to heed these messages from the margins. We've sought to integrate these messages and their attendant ways of knowing with our own, using credible, time-honored philosophical guides. We've done so in ways that honor the existing historical record, and that serve the public good: whether by helping to put souls to rest, or by producing more complete and balanced histories. We believe that this has helped raise archaeology's stock as a socially-relevant discipline.

I'd like to make one final point that goes to university missions generally, whether targeted at the public good or not. Today there are lots of appeals from academic leaders and rank-and-file faculty for more and better integration across the disciplines as a way to address the various sustainability issues (demographic and ecological) that currently bedevil us. I'd like to suggest that we need to couple this call for more and better interdisciplinary research with more and better intercultural research. Crossing disciplines is, in many ways, like crossing cultures (Reich and Reich 2006). But here I'm talking about cultural diversity on the ground; really-existing culture; what might be called "low culture". Our sustainability problem certainly includes issues around cultural inclusion and exclusion, as any astute observer of the modern city (e.g., Low et al. 2005) and our own campus will tell you. We ignore, marginalize, contain, or seek to escape such diversity at our own risk. As indicated by all available demographic projections, the "other" will very soon become "us". We need to teach better intercultural literacy here at the

university, and we need to graduate skilled cross-cultural navigators and negotiators who can produce the scholarship to inform the teaching of intercultural literacy. Only through such intercultural work can we hope to achieve a country whose understanding of cultural difference is much more intelligent, nuanced, and humane.

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