

## **Non-Native archaeology on Colonized Native Lands**

Jeff Burnett

American Indian & Indigenous Studies Third Annual Graduate Student Symposium in Indigenous Studies

April 19, 2019

Michigan State University - East Lansing, Michigan

Michigan State University occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary Lands of the Anishinaabeg—Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples.

- My name is Jeffrey Burnett, I am a settler on this land
- 
- I am a first year Phd student in the department of anthropology here at msu
- 
- I am an archaeologist and this summer I will be starting my preliminary field work for my eventual dissertation project which will focus on black and pluralistic communities in the North East or Mid-West. I am currently developing both the background research and establishing connections with groups or individuals who may join the project as collaborators.
  
- My research, as it stands now, hopes to engage with the community of Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, broadly defined through an exploration of the history of its black community in the past. A great deal of research on this aspect of the town's history has been done, including an African-American History Trail, but no archaeological investigations have occurred. I'm in talks with community partners about what archaeology could realistically offer and what it risks. I aim to engage and work on questions and projects relevant to the aims and goals of the local community if it seems like archaeology can be an effective methodology to explore their history.
  
- As a white non-resident I am an outsider to this community, so in order to facilitate my research and to gauge peoples' interest in the proposed project I have been emailing and calling on-island historical organizations, community groups, and museums. I will also be visiting the island this summer for preliminary field research. It is my intention to build / join a group, right now explicitly focusing on working with groups focused on the African American history of the town, interested in using archaeology to learn more about their past. I will use this summer to see if this project will be possible, productive, and non-harmful to the local community. I have also contacted the TIPO (tribal historic preservation officer) and plan to meet with her this summer.

## **Non-Native archaeology on Colonized Native Lands**

As I mentioned in my introduction, I am a graduate student here at MSU and I study historical archaeology. Historical archaeology is typically thought of as the study of the material remains of past societies that also left behind some other form of historical evidence, including but not limited to written texts and oral histories / oral traditions (SHA). In what is now the United States of America historical archaeology for the most part begins with European colonization, however there has been some effort in recent years to dissolve the artificial divide between this field and the incorrectly named “pre-historic” archaeology (Lightfoot 1995; Silliman 2010).

My research focuses on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century communities in the United States, through material culture and landscape studies, particularly exploring the lives and lived experiences of African-Americans. While this research falls within the period considered to be historic (rather than prehistoric), it nonetheless occurs on colonized indigenous lands and it would be irresponsible and ahistoric to ignore or obscure this history and continued reality.

This fact is particularly salient for my research because my potential field site is on the Island of Noepe, also known as Martha’s Vineyard, the current and ancestral home of the Aquinnah Wampanoag. From the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) website: Noepe was formed, it is said, when a benevolent being, a giant named Moshup was making his way from what is now the mainland to the cliffs of Aquinnah. Tired from his journey, Moshup dragged his foot heavily, creating a deep track in the mud. Gradually the ocean’s tides and the wind broadened and deepened the opening and creating the island of Noepe. The Wampanoag were the first people of Noepe and the giant Moshup taught them how to fish and catch whales (Wampanoag History).

The island and adjacent mainland have been the homeland of Aquinnah Wampanoag and their ancestors for at least 10,000 years (Burke 2009: 425-6; Wampanoag History) and as such the material

evidence of their lives are all over the land. Additionally, the numerous lines of intersection between African and African-American populations, Aquinnah Wampanoag, Portuguese immigrants, and European-Americans on Noepe make it difficult and unproductive to establish spatial or temporal boundaries delineating any area of the island where native lives and history could not have been.

In response to this, the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), with other groups of the Wampanoag nation, formed The Wampanoag Confederation in 1996. The group was formed specifically to address issues of repatriation in the wake of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and to facilitate consultation with contractors, archaeologists, and government officials in line with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 [section 101(b)(3) and 106 requirements] (Tribal Historic Preservation). However, their actions are not limited to providing consultation nor are archaeologists limited to only seeking consultation, it is simply the federally mandated minimum.

The question I have been wrestling with and one that I was often confronted with as a contract archaeologist, is how to do non-native archaeology without negatively impacting native peoples and histories. In particular, I am curious how archaeologists working within a particular time period can anticipate and appropriately care for material remains from earlier periods than their scope of work. I believe this creates two problems, which feed into each other and should worry not just archaeologists, but anyone concerned with the wellbeing of the material remains of the past.

The first is that without a preestablished framework that is in tune with the concerns of potential descendant communities, archaeologists will likely default to archaeologically defined ethics and appropriate practices when coming across unexpected material culture. These default practices are often harmful to Native American communities, their ancestors, and the materials themselves. The second is the well documented “curation crisis” in archaeology, where the prestige placed on fieldwork has created a situation where most archaeological materials excavated will never be studied and de-

accessioned (Kersel 2015; Voss 2012). Depending on one's point of view these can be seen as forgotten, orphaned, (Voss 2012) or captive artifacts, but it is clear that the practice of total collection of any and all Native American artifacts has to be changed. I wish to explore this topic with you today and to continue to learn from and engage with indigenous and non-indigenous / settler academics, experts, and archaeologists to develop an archaeological methodology that reflects the rights and desires of indigenous communities towards their material histories.

I hope to do my research in Oak Bluffs, a town on the northern coast of Martha's Vineyard, facing the mainland. According to the Massachusetts state historic preservation office, twelve sanctioned and non-academic archaeological investigations have occurred in Oak Bluffs, resulting in the identification and documentation of seven archeological sites related to pre-colonial life on the island (Galivan 2018). Additionally, the Tribal Historic Preservation Office acknowledges wide spread looting and construction related disturbance of past sites and human remains on the island (Tribal Historic Preservation), indicating that any archaeological excavation has the potential to disturb or uncover material culture related to the ancestors of the Aquinnah Wampanoag. This fact makes it abundantly clear that archaeologists intending to do work on the history of non-indigenous residents in an ethical way must include harm-reductive methods and procedures for encounter indigenous materials before the project begins.

Whether this involves methods to reduce or minimize ground disturbance, only working on "disturbed areas", eschewing excavations all together, or specific plans on what to do with various types of material culture, I am not of sure at this moment. One possible course of action readily available for historical archaeologists working on sites not typically conceived of as native is to borrow and expand on the methods already utilized by archaeologists in collaboration with or working for Native American communities. However, the exact methods of harm-reduction will differ based on the what is considered harmful in various places and contexts, but it **will** require meaningful and equitable

conversations with indigenous communities. It will require a radical shift in how the role of the archaeologist as expert and as preservationist has thus far been constructed. This is a possibility that archaeologists must be more sensitive to and something I would am excited to hear about at this event. I think going beyond what is legally necessary is an opportunity for archaeology to learn new ways to think about the curation crisis as we also work to redefine what ethical archaeology is.

Recognizing that all the lands we work on are colonized indigenous lands would set an institutional/ethical/legal precedent requiring archaeologists working on a site in downtown Lansing to consult with Indigenous descendant communities same as an archaeologist excavating on recognized tribal territory. Consultation is only the most basic and first step in the long process of harm-reductive archaeology. Ethical practices do not begin and end with legally mandated responsibilities and the existence of colonial history, space making, and lived experience does not erase native presence on the land. An archaeological site is on native land regardless of material remains.

In my case, I am reminded of this through the fact that my work is in a place where The Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), a federally recognized tribe, have, for a long time, been involved with local politics and systems of power in a meaningful way, particularly with regards to archaeology. As I mentioned before, on Noepe it is widely understood there is no place one could excavate and not be working on Aquinnah Wampanoag land or history. While this is true of sites across what is now the United States, settler groups on Martha's Vineyard are unable to ignore it there.

Through my work on the island, I hope to develop these ideas further, and to see how they might apply to cases where the archaeologist may be less accountable to specific native groups, while still excavating on colonized indigenous lands. In these cases, there is often an assumption that too much disturbance has occurred, even when archaeologists continuously find artifacts that date to pre-colonial life on the land, in even the most disturbed contexts.

One of the issues here may be a disconnection between what is important for archaeology, namely establishing historical and cultural context and preserving materials, and what may be important for indigenous scholars, living descendants, materials and ancestors. However, it may also be the case that the interests of archaeologists and native individuals and groups can align. Historical archaeology may be in a unique position, as compared to other fields of archaeology, to more easily engage with the development of harm-minimizing practices, especially with any such practices centered on non-destructive or collection adverse archaeology.

The practices and tools of historical archaeology differ in that they have experience incorporating oral histories and documents into their excavations and that they have different stakes when encountering artifacts from the deep past. Archaeologists dealing with the more recent past may be able to test these diverse methodologies with decreased risk, allowing the methods to be proliferated across the discipline. This however, would require the dissolution of the arbitrary barriers between historical and prehistoric archaeologies. There is space in archaeology for us to rethink our collection methods and it is within this space where the concerns of archaeologists can most strongly align with concerns of indigenous communities.

I want to thank you for taking the time to speak with me about this and for all of the comment and ideas that have been and will be shared.

## References

### Access

2019 Tribal Historic Preservation — Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah).  
<https://www.wampanoagtribe.org/tribal-historic-preservation>.

2019 Wampanoag History — Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah).  
<https://www.wampanoagtribe.org/wampanoag-history>.

### Access

2019 What is Historical Archaeology? - Society for Historical Archaeology.

Burke, A. L., W. A. Eldridge, J. C. Ort, B. G. Pelletier and B. S. Robinson

2009 Paleoindian aggregation and social context at Bull Brook. *American Antiquity* 74: 423.

Galvin, W. F.

2018 Bibliography of Archaeological Survey & Mitigation Reports: Massachusetts 2018 Supplement.  
Massachusetts Historical Commission Boston, MA.

Kersel, M. M.

2015 An Issue of Ethics? Curation and the Obligations of Archaeology. *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 3(1).

Lightfoot, K. G.

1995 Culture Contact Studies: Redefining the Relationship between Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology.  
*American Antiquity* 60(2): 199-217.

Silliman, S. W.

2010 Crossing, Bridging, and Transgressing Divides in the Study of Native North America. In *Across a Great Divide*, L. Scheiber, M. D. Mitchell and K. G. Tregonning, editors. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.

Voss, B. L.

2019 Curation as Research. A Case Study in Orphaned and Underreported Archaeological Collections.  
*Archaeological Dialogues* 19.2 (2012): 145-69.