Book Review of *Archaeological Theory and the Politics of Cultural Heritage* by Laurajane Smith

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The passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1991 significantly changed the way archaeology would be done in the United States. This act was presaged by growing complaints and resentment directed at the scientific community by Native Americans over the treatment of their ancestral remains. Many of the underlying issues came to a head with the discovery and subsequent court battles over the 9,200-year-old individual commonly known as Kennewick Man. This had a galvanizing effect on the discipline, not only perpetuating the sometimes adversarial relationship between archaeologists and Native Americans, but also creating a rift between those archaeologists who understood Native American concerns and those who saw their ancestral skeletal remains representing the legacy of humankind and thus belonging to everyone. Similar scenarios have emerged in Australia.

In this context, an important question to consider is whether archaeologists would have been willing to reconsider how they interacted with descendant communities had that afforded them the opportunity to avoid the controversies leading to NAGPRA and the Kennewick Man controversy as well as other cases elsewhere. This isn’t merely a rhetorical question because the often one-sided nature of scientific research, which has been termed scientific colonialism, continues to have important implications for the future of archaeology not only in North America but worldwide where indigenous peoples are the major stakeholders in the archaeological record.

For Laurajane Smith, an Australian archaeologist and cultural heritage specialist, this power inequality is the central theme in this perceptive volume in which she carefully deconstructs the practice of archaeology in North America and Australia and the development and application of cultural heritage policies. Given that the majority of archaeological projects in these countries are today conducted under the auspices of cultural resource management (CRM), the underlying notion of stewardship, as defined and applied by non-indigenous policymakers, has strongly influenced the profession. Yet seldom has the unilateral aspect of stewardship been recognized.

Smith explores the skewed relationship between the goals of archaeological research and the concerns of indigenous peoples in a series of complementary chapters: “The Cultural Politics of Identity,” “Archaeological Theory and the ‘Politics’ of the Past,” “Archaeology and the Context of Governance,” “Archaeological Stewardship,” “Significant Concepts and the Embedding of Processual Discourse in CRM,” “Role of Legislation in the Governance and Material Culture in America and Australia,” “NAGPRA and Kennewick,” and “The ‘Death of Archaeology,’” supplemented by a concluding chapter and extensive bibliography. Tracing the development of cultural heritage practice in Australia and the United States, Smith reveals both the contributions and limitations of current management strategies, including the key notions of significance and stewardship, and the continuing influence of processual archaeological theory. Here she is keenly aware that archaeology is seldom as objective as it is purported to be, and that archaeological practice can have a direct impact on people’s lives: “For Indigenous peoples . . . what is often at stake is a right to control their own sense of identity, which in turn can have vital implications in wider negotiations with governments and their bureaucracies over the political and cultural legitimacy of Indigenous interests.” What has challenged the status quo in recent years is both the emerging discourse between archaeologists and descendant communities and the incorporation of more inclusive, self-reflexive perspectives into archaeological theory.

The issues that Smith and others have raised concerning the role of archaeology today are compelling its practitioners to make their work more representative, responsible, and ethical. As Smith notes, “By not engaging with, and attempting to understand, the contexts and consequences of archaeological knowledge and practice the
discipline will only continue to rehearse the tired old claims to archaeological authority and expertise.” Although many archaeologists will likely disagree with the author’s arguments, this volume nonetheless deserves a careful reading by all, especially if we hope to avoid some of the pitfalls of past archaeological practice. **George P. Nicholas, Department of Archaeology, Simon Fraser University.**