

## Decolonizing „Prehistory“: Deep Time and Topological Knowledge in the Americas

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As recent publications about the human deep past (for example Yuval Harari's *Sapiens*, 2011) have shown, indigenous knowledge archives, especially those built on orally transmitted information, are still neglected in scientific discourse. This has significant implications for pressing conflicts about land rights, heritage, artifacts and human remains as well as identity formation with focus on America. This conference looked at different and innovative approaches to combine indigenous conceptualizations of the deep past and Western (scientific) narratives. Organized in the context of the research project „Constructions of American Antiquity“ at the University of Rostock, the conference brought together an international group of indigenous and Western scholars.

After a warmhearted welcome by the mayor of Schwerin, Rico Badenschier, the keynote by ANNETTE KOLODNY (University of Arizona, Tucson) explored the contemporary repercussions of discourses about heritage and antiquity by analyzing the competing narratives surrounding the legal battle over the Penobscot River between the Penobscot Nation and the State of Massachusetts. The lawsuits are centered on conflicting interpretations of language, concepts of land, and historical narratives between indigenous societies and settler colonial society. Here, the field – a courtroom deeply rooted in the settler colonial process and a society built on territorial and epistemic dispossession – is already stacked against Indigenous societies. Profoundly affected by the contemporary epistemic and moral backlash supported by one of the world's highest authorities (the White House), Kolodny proposed a nuanced but ac-

tive involvement of scholars in these conflicts, both inside and outside academia, promoting respect for indigenous concepts of history and cultural identity while taking issue with white supremacist ideologies.

The first panel of the conference had a focus on archaeological sites of the Maya in Yucatan. By addressing the recent colonial history of these sites, their spatial arrangements and visual representation, the papers by JESSICA CHRISTIE (East Carolina University, Greenville) and MATHIEU PICAS (University of Barcelona, written in cooperation with Margarita Díaz-Andreu) addressed the identity and heritage politics of the local indigenous communities living close to archaeological sites. Jessica Christie took a closer look at the Coba and the Maya heritage politics. She proposed that the work of local artists and the integration of the Ejido system (a land holding system originating from indigenous and Spanish concepts) into the site served as a third space, linking ancient history and present communities. Mathieu Picas analyzed Tulum as a diplomatic, touristic and especially sacred space, where religious practices are today still an important part of the identity policies. Both presentations showed the significance of the frequently ignored relationship between local Indigenous communities and archaeological sites.

The second panel shifted the focus back to North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. CHRISTEN MUCHER's (Smith College, Northampton) paper took a closer look at how indigenous oral histories of ancient events like migration patterns were often discredited in Euro-American discourses in the nineteenth century. Oral histories – if taken seriously at all – were reduced to bare data to be integrated into western taxonomies about populations and their movements since antiquity. They thus served as validations for the objectiveness of newly invented sciences like statistics and demography whose data was used in furthering colonial biopolitical control and dispossession. In the next presentation, MELISSA GNIADK (University of Toronto) explored how subterranean spaces, like Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, shaped our understandings about the deep past. In the early nineteenth century, the

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Mammoth Cave became a place where settler colonialism and slave labor intersected with a modern press – the cave was made popular by an article in the Massachusetts *Spy* in 1816. Melissa Gniadek showed how the creation of a deep past around the cave was not only informed by archaeological and geological publications but relied on fictional accounts like the novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* by Edgar Allan Poe, where deep past and cave came together in the ‘Hollow Earth Theory’.

The day was continued by a visit to the local representations of a deep past, the Slavic Ceremonial Center and Archaeological Museum in Groß Raden, where visitors can experience ancient history – highlighted by several events like medieval markets and fighting shows – while knowledge about the real world of the Slavs and about the colonality of the replacement of Slavic by Christian culture remains scant due to the absence of Slavic written documentation.

The next panel opened with PHIL DELORIA’s (Harvard University, Cambridge) analysis of scientific narrations such as Yuval N. Harari’s *Sapiens* (2011) in relation to critical texts such as Vine Deloria Jr.’s „love-hate letter to scientists“, *Red Earth, White Lies* (1997). Looking at possible ways for an „indigenous critique of Deep History“, Phil Deloria discussed the role of agency and contingency in long-frame storytelling and big history texts, and pointed out how the seemingly disinterested narratives of books like Harari’s circulate knowledge gained from other books whose methods of combining fragmentary data with a maximum of speculation on the deeds of indigenous American ‘Paleo’ savages turn out to be both empirically and theoretically ‘thin’. Another indigenous perspective on how to reconstruct the past and shape the present was offered by MICHAEL WILCOX (Stanford University). Focusing on the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, Wilcox explored ways to overcome myths of indigenous extinction. He illustrated how indigenous archaeology is one of the most promising approaches to counteract scholarly narratives, especially those drawn from abstract and culturally empty DNA analyses. Furthermore, he advocated efforts to integrate Native

Americans’ own historiography in the education curricula.

The second panel of the day centered on Indigenous landmark knowledge in the Pacific Northwest. RICK BUDHWA (Simon Fraser University, Burnaby) showed the great potential of indigenous oral traditions based on three case studies and his work in cultural resource management. His analyses of oral traditions of the 1700 Cascadia earthquake and tsunami, the Bonneville Landslide / the Bridge of the Gods, and the ancient volcanic eruption at Crater Lake / Mount Mazama highlighted the advantages of a ‘more holistic view of the past’. Budhwa also illustrated how cooperation with First Nations in British Columbia can be mutually beneficial for the tribes and scientists. The political and scientific significance of oral traditions also played a central role in GESA MACKENTHUN’s (University of Rostock) presentation. She criticized colonial efforts that reject indigenous land claims based on missing proof of ‘continuous occupation’ and the dismissal of oral traditions as mere fiction. Mackenthun explained how numerous oral texts of the Klamath Tribes recorded between the 1870s and the early twentieth century describe the landscape and transformative events such as the eruption of Mount Mazama 7.700 years ago in impressive but highly symbolic ways. Her research indicated that these stories serve both as convincing proof to the tribes’ long-term settlement in the area, and as counter-texts to Western binaries and purely Cartesian methods of preserving knowledge.

The following panel discussed indigenous archaeology and the indigenous presence in the Pacific Northwest. Indigenous archaeology in British Columbia has developed significantly since the early twentieth century, as illustrated in JEFF OLIVER’s (University of Aberdeen) paper. He pointed out that while twentieth century archaeology was dismissive towards Indigenous people, regarding them and related artifacts as exotic and abstract objects of study, twenty-first century archaeology began to focus on collaborations with people as important bearers of knowledge. Oliver suggested that cooperation between scientists and indigenous communities and a respectful treatment of the ances-

tors may allow more successful reconstructions of the past. Histories of changing landscapes, settler colonialism, and Native Survival were at the core of COLL THRUSH's (University of British Columbia, Vancouver) presentation. He presented three stories located around the Southern Salish Sea, all of which examined people and their claims to the land. While the first study told the story of local prairies as contested grounds between settlers and indigenous tribes in the 1850s, the second story presented local tribes' connection to the land via deep memories such as *The Epic of the Winds*. The third story brought together the different ways of looking at the land by addressing present environmental concerns and Indigenous claims to land.

The final panel unfortunately had to go without the legal perspective of REBECCA TSOSIE (University of Arizona, Tucson), which, however, will appear in the conference proceedings. In his paper, KEITH THOR CARLSON (University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon) discussed the influence of settler colonialism in North America with special emphasis on the sites of southern British Columbia. His study dissected how settler colonial claims have conflicted and continue to clash with the interests of indigenous people such as the Stó:lō and their traditional ties to the land.

The concluding discussion of the conference highlighted how the dialogue between indigenous orally transmitted knowledge and Western science facilitates a more comprehensive reconstruction of the human deep past, across academic disciplines and beyond colonial politics. Aided by the expertise of the invited discussants Daniel Lord Smail (Harvard University), Hartmut Lutz (University of Greifswald), Susanne Lachenicht (Bayreuth University), John Munro (St. Mary's University, Halifax), and Astrid Windus (University of Münster), the symposium showed that the construct of 'prehistory' is deeply implicated in the colonial episteme and will have to be discarded on the way toward a more integrative, transcultural, and politically fair historiography of America's deep past.

#### Conference Overview:

Annette Kolodny (Tucson): Competing Narratives of Ancestry in Donald Trump's America: Personal DNA Testing, the „Ethno-State,“ Native American Land Rights, and the Imperative for Scholarly Intervention

Jessica Christie (Greenville): Yucatec „Maya“ Historicity and Identity Constructions: The Case of Coba

Mathieu Picas / Margarita Díaz-Andreu (both Barcelona): 'Scientific' vs. Local Narratives About Pre-Hispanic Sites: Tulum as a Case Study

Christen Mucher (Northampton): „Born of the Soil“: Demography's Roots and the Refusal of Oral Tradition

Melissa Gniadek (Toronto): Mammoth Cave, Poe, and Speculative (Pre)Histories

Phil Deloria (Cambridge, MA): *Red Earth, White Lies, Sapiens*, and the Deep Politics of Knowledge

Michael Wilcox (Stanford): Reversing the Terminal Narrative: The Mythology of Conquest and Extinction on the Borders of the Spanish Empire

Rick Budhwa (Burnaby, BC): Witnessing Catastrophe: Correlations between Catastrophic Paleoenvironmental Events and First Nations Oral Traditions in the Pacific Northwest

Gesa Mackenthun (Rostock): Remembering Gi'was: Indigenous Landmark Legends and the Politics of American Antiquity

Jeff Oliver (Aberdeen): A Historiography of Indigenous Archaeology in British Columbia

Coll Thrush (Vancouver): Prairies, Ice, and Oil: Settler Colonialism and Deep Time around the Southern Salish Sea

Keith Carlson (Saskatoon): Myth Making and Unmaking: Erasing and Creating the Sacred in Settler Colonial Strategies of Displacement

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