


## On Rehumanizing Pleistocene People of the Western Hemisphere

Bonnie L. Pitblado 

*Since the emergence of the niche in Folsom, New Mexico, in the late 1920s, peopling archaeology has sought to understand the earliest human occupants of the Western Hemisphere. Three generations of practitioners have made great strides in the techno-environmental arena. However, we have largely failed to tap into PaleoIndigenous intellectual, emotional, and social lives—the very domains that made Ice Age people as fully human as we are. As a result, our interpretations of those pioneering populations could often apply as readily to a colony of ants or a herd of wildebeest as they do to living, breathing, thinking, dreaming, loving, striving human ancestors. This article first explores the reasons for our failure to fully actualize First Peoples, identifying and implicating a feedback loop that includes practitioner homogeneity (we have always been and continue to be disproportionately white men of European descent); our predominantly positivist worldview; our language, training, and practice; and even the limited nature of the material record we study. This article also, however, highlights the ways that an important minority of peopling scholars have sought to access the humanity of PaleoIndigenous people. By more consistently mobilizing our own human capacity to creatively interrogate the deep past, we will produce scholarship that more consistently recognizes the capacity of the people who lived it and, just as importantly, respects those living today.*

**Keywords:** peopling of the Western Hemisphere, peopling of the New World, peopling of the Americas, Paleoindian, Paleo-Indigenous, First People

*Desde la aparición del nicho en Folsom, Nuevo México a finales de los años 1920, la arqueología del poblamiento ha buscado entender los ocupantes humanos más tempranos del hemisferio occidental. Tres generaciones de profesionales han dado pasos grandes en el campo tecno-ambiental. Sin embargo, en gran medida hemos fracasado en ganar acceso a las vidas intelectuales, emocionales y sociales de los paleo-indígenas, las mismas esferas que hicieron que la gente de la Edad del Hielo fuera tan completamente humana como nosotros. Como resultado, nuestras interpretaciones sobre esas poblaciones pioneras a menudo podrían aplicarse tan fácilmente a una colonia de hormigas o una manada de ñus como a los ancestros humanos que viven, respiran, piensan, sueñan, aman y se esfuerzan. En primer lugar, este artículo analiza las razones de nuestra incapacidad para actualizar por completo a los Primeros Pobladores, identificando e implicando un ciclo de retroalimentación que incluye la homogeneidad de los profesionales (siempre hemos sido y seguimos siendo desproporcionadamente hombres blancos de ascendencia europea); nuestra cosmovisión predominantemente positivista; nuestro idioma, formación y práctica; e incluso la naturaleza limitada del registro material que estudiamos. Sin embargo, este artículo también destaca las maneras en que una importante minoría de académicos dedicados a estudiar el poblamiento ha buscado acceder a la humanidad de los pueblos paleo-indígenas. Al movilizar de manera más consistente nuestra propia capacidad humana de interrogar creativamente el pasado profundo, produciremos conocimiento que reconozca más consistentemente la capacidad de las personas que lo vivieron y, lo que es igualmente importante, respete a quienes viven hoy.*

**Palabras clave:** poblamiento del hemisferio occidental, poblamiento del nuevo mundo, poblamiento de las Américas, Paleoindio, Paleo-indígena, Primeros Pobladores

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A few years ago, the editor for an academic press asked me to write a book about the peopling of the Americas. He envisioned it as an update of a synthetic piece I wrote in 2011 for the *Journal of Archaeological Research*. Enthusiastic, I submitted a prospectus and secured a contract. I set out to research and write the manuscript, going through all the motions I usually do when tackling a project. I reviewed literature that had slipped through the 2010s cracks, jotted down tidy little annotations, and created an outline. Then, I rolled up my sleeves to write, and . . . nothing.

I. Could. Not. Write. And I could not understand *why* I could not write, because words do not usually fail me. Months went by. Then years. I blamed my son's baseball games for taking up too much of my research time. I blamed service commitments—too much energy expended reviewing others' work and too little directed at my own. I took a semester-long sabbatical, believing that buying time would solve the problem. Still, however, nothing on the peopling front. Just me and an empty screen.

Throughout all of this, I found my bliss in other ways. I cofounded the Oklahoma Public Archaeology Network (OKPAN), which serves and facilitates relationship building among Oklahoma communities that engage the past: archaeologists, but also citizens of the state's many sovereign tribal nations, members of other descendant communities, and others. As OKPAN grew, I transitioned from championing outreach-oriented "public archaeology" to embracing "community archaeology," an approach that places communities and their members—rather than the archaeologist—at the center of the research process. At some point during that transition, it dawned on me exactly why the peopling book I had thought I wanted to write would never come to pass—at least not in the form I originally envisioned it.

Through no fault of their own, the people at the heart of my unwritten volume—those who first graced the earth's Western Hemisphere—were the problem. As we, the archaeologists who control the scholarly narrative too often construe them, those "First Americans" lack any real semblance of *humanity*. To be sure, they were accomplished eating, hunting, migrating machines,

almost superhuman in their ability to slay mighty beasts and sprint across continents. But people with hopes and dreams? Relationships? Beliefs? Artistry? Any of the qualities that distinguish humans from other top predators? Not so much.

Why does this matter? Most innocuously, it can make our scholarship boring and inaccessible. Our books, articles, and presentations even now tend to focus on subjects that occupy the bottom rung of A. H. Maslow's (1948) hierarchy of human needs: food, water, warmth, and rest. There is nothing wrong with any individual study of these; "First Americans" did eat, drink, shiver, and sleep. But most peopling scholars are trained as anthropologists. We know full well that our humanity resides in our extrasomatic adaptations—in our culture. But our work suggests that we sometimes lose sight of this.

If the only problem were that treating our subjects as we do any other animal predisposes us to boring scholarship, I would not have written this essay. However, I believe that our failure to fully actualize "First Americans" also reflects and reinforces the homogeneity of those controlling the narrative. We are predominantly white, mostly men, and we think and talk as the Westerners we are. When we do this uncritically, we run the risk of dehumanizing—as treating as something less than fully human—the people we study, and in some real ways, their descendants, and even one other. That is not just boring. It is harmful in the same way, if not with the same ferocity, that dehumanizing racism and misogyny cause real harm.

That said, peopling scholars are good people who *do not* want to harm others and who *do* want to do good archaeology and often succeed in their efforts. Moreover, and as I will discuss, there have always been practitioners among us who have tried to illuminate and celebrate First Peoples' humanity. Still, by unpacking, understanding, and owning the ways we have been our own worst enemies, we can position ourselves to more fully acknowledge and honor the humanity of the "First Americans" we study, their descendants, and our fellow practitioners. In the end, this will advance our scholarship.

This article proceeds in two parts. The first focuses on the problem and its origins: how a

series of interrelated variables have conspired to dehumanize First Peoples of the Western Hemisphere. This section does not point fingers at individual practitioners. Instead, it aims to identify the history and structures that have shaped peopling studies. The second, more uplifting part of the article focuses on solutions to the problem, not only as practiced by past and contemporary scholars (and here, I do point fingers) but also in terms of concrete steps we can take to accelerate rehumanization of First Peoples.

Although this article focuses on the research domain within which I have been enculturated, neither the variables I implicate in our “dehumanization problem” nor its solutions are unique to the “peopling of the Americas” universe. Indeed, I invite readers from all backgrounds to reflect on the degree to which this discussion parallels and (or) diverges from your own experiences as archaeologists practicing your craft within the constraints of a discipline firmly rooted in Western colonialism.

### **The Dehumanization of Pleistocene People of the Western Hemisphere (The Problem)**

#### *Our Origin Story*

Let us begin on ground that is familiar to peopling-of-the-Western-Hemisphere scholars and that provides historical context for everyone else.

A group of “First Americans” used intricately crafted stone projectile points to kill two dozen giant Pleistocene bison 11,000 years ago. Mother Nature quickly buried the remains of the animals and the spear tips that doomed them, sealing them away and preserving them for 11 millennia.

In 1908, freed slave and ranch foreman George McJunkin encountered the bones in an arroyo near Folsom, New Mexico, and mentioned them to a local acquaintance—blacksmith Carl Schwachheim. Years passed, as did George McJunkin. Then, in 1926, Schwachheim apprised personnel at the Colorado Museum of Natural History (CMNH) of the find.

Impressed by the giant bones, CMNH director Jesse Figgins enlisted Schwachheim to excavate more specimens for the museum’s paleontological collections. Schwachheim complied,

quickly encountering something beyond just faunal remains: a spear point nestled among them. This indicated to him and CMNH personnel that Ice Age humans had felled the megabison—a big deal!

Via telegram, Figgins alerted scientific luminaries to the discovery, enticing the likes of Alfred Kidder (Carnegie Institution) and Frank H. H. Roberts (Smithsonian Institution) to visit the Folsom site, as it would thereafter be known. One of the invitees, Barnum Brown (American Museum of Natural History), took a “trust but verify” stance, excavating additional site deposits and replicating the CMNH finds.

Convinced, the VIP entourage endorsed the Folsom site in the pages of the nation’s most prominent scientific journals and popular presses, framing it as unequivocal evidence that human beings hunted in the Western Hemisphere during the Ice Age. Until then, that notion had been bitterly debated by two scholarly factions, respectively advocating for and against Pleistocene occupation of the Americas.

This breaking of the Ice-Age human “bar” launched a “Forty-Niner”-style projectile-point rush on a Great Plains landscape ravaged by Dust Bowl drought and erosion. Unsurprisingly, given the relentlessness of the searchers, finds at Blackwater Draw, near Clovis, New Mexico, and others quickly followed, and “peopling” archaeology was born.

Like most origin stories, this one has been repeated ad nauseum. As researchers, we tell it to situate new contributions to the literature. As educators, we use it to hook undergrads and the public on the discipline. Everyone loves an epic hunting tale, right? To address why some may not love this one, let us reframe the Folsom saga to humanize its actors and contextualize their roles.

PaleoIndigenous people wrote the story. Eleven millennia later, a Black American recognized the story but died before anyone recognized him. A blue-collar, white American shared the story with local scientists and followed their orders to dig it up. When he found projectile points and bones in situ, his Denver-based supervisors assumed control of the project, but only until the final arbiters of archaeological knowledge arrived on scene to legitimize the data and the narrative.

Viewed this way, Folsom is a tale of the marginalization or outright exclusion of the storywriters, their descendants, and other people of color; local landowners and laborers; and women. An already entrenched Western social structure dictated that highly educated white men from anointed institutions would judge and disseminate what transpired on that distant Pleistocene day. If we are being honest, most finds of the oldest archaeological sites in the Western Hemisphere have played out pretty much like this ever since.

Let us tug on this thread and consider how our Folsom origins relate to subsequent peopling archaeologists'—including our own—cognition, language, and practice. The goal is to explore how these have structurally restricted our ability to accord past people their full-blown humanity and, even occasionally, enabled us to treat our fellow humans in ways that can feel dehumanizing.

### *The Way We Think*

The Western-positivist paradigm that produced the iconic Folsom story is not, of course, the only way the site—or anything else in the universe—can be understood, and as Gerhard Shipley and Deborah H. Williams (2019) argued, it can be quite limiting. Along with what I see as that paradigm's helpful contributions (e.g., the Scientific Method), Western philosophy also bestowed on us an array of cultural constraints and blinders that have hindered scientific progress. One of its most damaging legacies to peopling archaeology, specifically, is its reification of binary thinking.

Positivism-enculturated Westerners conceive of the world in black-and-white terms (witness this sentence). Blurry lines and shades of gray discomfit us. As I write, polarization reigns. Even when one tries to navigate a gray area, one's opponents are quick to rearticulate one's position. Support the Second Amendment and gun legislation? You are "antigun." Support a woman's right to choose? You are "pro-abortion." But the real world, its problems, and their solutions *are* gray, and binary approaches more often exacerbate than resolve tensions.

Yet, peopling archaeology has been particularly fertile ground for binary problem

formulation. As I noted, in the run-up to the Folsom excavations, scientists largely sorted themselves into two camps, one supporting and the other denying Ice Age human occupation of the Americas. David Meltzer (2009) colorfully described their "Great Paleolithic War," including enough quotes (with words such as "liar" and "charlatan") to show that soldiers on both sides conceptualized themselves as righteous crusaders, not dispassionate scientists. I imagine some remained open minded, but their views do not make great copy.

I would like to report that the breaking of the "American Paleolithic" bar at Folsom led to nuanced peopling problem formulation, but it led instead to . . . another bar: the Clovis bar. By and large, subsequent peopling scholarship unfolded as a series of sites proposed as "pre-Clovis" contenders, followed by crowdsourced efforts by "Clovis Firsters" to discredit those sites' evidence and advocates. Even today, having reached a scholarly consensus that Clovis was not first, we *still* greet new pre-Clovis contenders with skepticism so zealous that it can feel a lot like self-appointed gatekeeping.

Even for those who chose not to engage in the Clovis war, binary problem formulation ruled—and too often still rules—the day. Overkill-overkill, anyone? Clovis as big-game specialists or generalists? By land or by sea? We have often contented ourselves with defining two sides to an issue, entrenching ourselves in one of them, and duking it out long after it becomes clear that the issue was never binary to begin with. None of us does this all the time, and even when we succumb, we often recognize that the "truth" lies in neither camp. Sometimes, we communicate this effectively. Other times, we do not.

Our predilection for binarism may be our most fundamental cognitive challenge, but it is not the only one. I have discussed elsewhere our archaeological forebears' tendency to overlook landscapes that struck them—as recent European American immigrants—as hostile or unfit for human life. I made this point in relation to the Rocky Mountains, which I think played a more important role in the peopling process than we have yet recognized (Pitblado 2017). Kurt Rademaker and others (e.g., 2014) have made

the same basic case for the South American Andes.

Others have offered similar perspectives vis-à-vis oceans and maritime resources. Jon Erlandson and Scott Fitzpatrick (2006) pointed out that archaeologists for a long time wrongly conceived of oceans in general—and the Pacific coast of the Americas specifically—as off-putting environments with only marginally productive economic resources. Dennis Stanford and Bruce Bradley (2012) made a similar case for the productivity of Atlantic waters along the Arctic ice bridge that linked Europe and North America during parts of the Pleistocene.

Returning to the point of this essay: how have these cognitive biases and blinders conspired to “dehumanize” the First Peoples of the Western Hemisphere? In short, *our* historically conditioned worldviews have too often led us to underestimate *their* capacity, creativity, and nuanced decision making. By virtue of who *we* are and how we were enculturated, most of us wear positivist glasses most of the time. We can take them off, but to do that, we must first recognize that they are there.

### *The Way We Talk*

As a linguistic anthropology core class taught many of us, cognition is inextricably linked to language. As a result, the terminological tools of the peopling trade have, like our cognitive frameworks, led us to undermine—unintentionally but nonetheless meaningfully—the humanity of those we study and even one another. How can it be otherwise? If our Western positivism and European roots condition us to think in particular ways, how can our linguistic structures and words fail to reflect this?

In fact, even the most fundamental of archaeological terms, “prehistory,” *does* reflect this and *does* undermine the humanity of contemporary Indigenous people. It does so by labeling Indigenous people as those who existed before “history” (that of their conquerors) began. The “break,” however, between “prehistory” and “history” is entirely artificial from the vantage of Indigenous people—a point some archaeologists now recognize by instead using the terms “precolonial” (or “precontact”) and “colonial.”

Similarly, most of us no longer refer to PaleoIndigenous people as “Early Man” because we realize that this gendered phrase erases 50% of our target population (or, less charitably, we realize that *American Antiquity* and other journals will not publish our work unless we use inclusive language “as a matter of equity” [p. 6 of this journal’s style guide]). The rationale here is that one way to combat sexism in archaeology is to excise it before it leaves our mouths.

In the same way that language once promoted gender-based peopling inequity, so too has it reinforced ethnic disparities and the dehumanization that stems from them. Our cultural anthropological training helps us perceive and understand the power differential that distinguishes American archaeologists from their PaleoIndigenous subjects and their descendants. Indeed, many of us teach the “Myth of the Moundbuilders” as a cautionary tale about the fraught intersection of archaeology and “race.”

Yet, we have been slow to recognize how some of our most familiar words and phrases reinforce the dominant position of white archaeologists while actively hurting those not part of our privileged group. Consider these linguistic peopling building blocks: “colonization” and its derivatives, “New World,” “First Americans,” “Paleoamerican,” and “Paleoindian.” Each one defines its referent from the vantage of the European conquerors who celebrated their success by enshrining the term in the English language. When we use any one of them, we sprinkle salt in Indigenous wounds. Let me elaborate.

Peopling archaeologists seek to understand how Pleistocene people first entered and settled the Western Hemisphere. We conceive of that process as “colonization,” and we talk about it as such. However, for many Indigenous people and others in 2021, the word “colonization” is synonymous with “appropriation,” and it specifically connotes European hegemony. Not only is the word “colonization” therefore a poor fit for Pleistocene peopling processes, but using it reinforces the power differential between our European American selves and the Indigenous descendants of those we study.

In much the same way, when we say or write “New World,” we remind members of descendant communities that what was to their



ancestors the Only World was “New” to ours—the late-to-arrive European conquistadores, explorers, and settlers who initiated genocide of native people. Those mass casualties, and the fundamental human rights violation they represent, remain fresh in the minds of Indigenous descendants. We may intellectually acknowledge that trauma, but Indigenous people live it.

For this reason, referring to our study area as “the Americas,” or to its original people as “First Americans,” reminds descendants that along with their land, our ancestors co-opted naming rights, using them to honor the sixteenth-century Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci. “Paleoindian,” of course, derives from Christopher Columbus’s belief that he had reached South Asia and encountered “Indians,” a blunder codified in the English language, yet in this case, recognized by most of us as problematic.

It is easy for me to envision someone reading this piece thinking, “Well, gee, I definitely do not want to offend the people in my audience, but I am generally talking to other Paleoindian archaeologists, not members of contemporary Indigenous communities.” That is likely true, but it is, in fact, part of the problem. On a small scale, we will cultivate more diverse audiences by using inclusive language. On a big scale, archaeology in the 2020s should engage descendant communities not *just* as audience members but as collaborators (e.g., Atalay et al. 2014).

Lest we think that peopling archaeologists’ word choices offend only Indigenous people, we are also notorious for offending one another. Elsewhere (Pitblado 2011:354), I have mentioned our predilection for “toxic rhetoric”—words and terms that demean those with whom we disagree. Others have made the same point (e.g., Fiedel and Haynes 2004; Young Americans 2012). Why do we do this? In the spirit of this article, I implicate our nasty “Paleolithic War” roots and the cantankerous alpha-male personalities of those willing to endure life as a peopling archaeologist.

One other point about peopling archaeologists’ language and its capacity to dehumanize, this one the subtlest of all. As any quick scan of titles we give our articles and presentations reveals (try it on an SAA annual meeting program or *PaleoAmerica* table of contents), we

almost always speak of First Peoples using terms such as these: “environment,” “stone,” “projectile point,” “bone,” “chronology,” “stratigraphy,” “subsistence,” “foraging,” “adaptation,” “technology,” “migration.”

These words are well suited for clinical discussions of how First Peoples filled their immediate biological needs, which is, as I have already stipulated, an entirely valid dimension to explore. But consider for a moment all the words we *do not* use in our titles but that colleagues working in other niches do. Here, for example, is a term list I quickly compiled from nonpeopling sessions scheduled for the 2020 SAA meeting: “power,” “home,” “community,” “choices,” “entanglement,” “multisensory,” “control,” “reimagining,” “acoustics.” To me, these words evoke fully actualized humans in ways the ones we use—including but not exclusively those listed in the preceding paragraph—simply do not. Consequently, our challenge is to expand our lexicon to help us conceptualize and talk about First Peoples with the sort of richness that characterized their lives.

*The Way We Engage the Peopling Record: Theory, Material Culture, and Methodology*

As surely as our linguistic choices reflect and reinforce our subconscious thought processes, so too do they convey our conscious theoretical frameworks. Those, together with the material culture we study and the methods we employ to do it, also contribute to our tendency to conceptualize First Peoples as more biologically driven organisms than fully enculturated human beings.

For many years, peopling scholarship paralleled the general theoretical arc of American archaeology. During the culture-historic era, we enthusiastically typed projectile points and dated early occupations and sites. Heck, spear points and radiocarbon dates still enchant us more than they probably should. We also embraced the New Archaeology of the 1960s, with its emphasis on the scientific method and privileging of environment, economy, and technology as drivers of human behavior and culture change.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, when many archaeologists welcomed elements of the post-processual critique, peopling scholars largely

resisted. We were loath to experiment with a historical rather than scientific approach to questions. We chose not to recognize that First Peoples ever acted as individuals, conceived of their world in symbolic terms, or perpetuated (or rejected) gender, status, or power differentials. We even tacitly denied that our brand of archaeology is political and therefore capable of marginalizing and disenfranchising—dehumanizing—its subjects, their descendants, and one another.

Why has the postprocessual critique failed to resonate with the peopling community? Clearly, given my discussion so far, I believe that who we are, how we think, and how we talk are parts of the explanation. However, I also think that the very nature of the PaleoIndigenous material-culture record contributes to our sense that we must toil predominantly within materialist frameworks.

Peopling researchers study the physical detritus of First Peoples, who moved around a lot and created a record profoundly ravaged by the forces of time. Based on even the most rudimentary understanding of mobile populations and taphonomy, this means we are unlikely to encounter remnants of a built environment (because highly mobile people usually do not expend energy erecting permanent structures) and destined to encounter only the most resistant stone and bone objects (because they are what preserves).

If the earliest material record consists so disproportionately of stone tools, dense megafauna bones, and the occasional ephemeral fire feature, would we not be downright irresponsible to try to access human motivations beyond the subsistence and land-use activities that these archaeological signatures most obviously represent? If First Peoples did not leave behind monuments or other more “obvious” windows to their thoughts and values, who are we to overreach the record? Again, are the sorts of questions posed by those with postprocessual leanings not beyond the scope of what we can responsibly address?

Not necessarily, I think—a point to which I will return later in this article. Regardless, the reality that our principal points of access to First Peoples’ lives *have* been stone tools and

animal bones has impacted our practice in important ways. For example, those who pursue peopling archaeology receive much more training in geology, lithics, zooarchaeology, and archaeometry than those who specialize in US Southeast, Mayan, and many other usually more recent archaeological niches. We absolutely need that specialized training to effectively deal with the sites and assemblages we encounter in our careers.

However, graduate students only have so much time and financial support, and universities increasingly emphasize degree-completion time at the expense of educational breadth. For every elective class a student takes in geoarchaeology or lithic analysis, (s)he forsakes those that her Southeast, Mayanist, and other peers take to prepare to do *their* best archaeology: typically, cultural anthropology, Native American and Indigenous studies, and other humanistic pursuits. A peopling education therefore entrenches and perpetuates a Western-positivist epistemology while marginalizing anthropological humanism.

In my view, two particularly noteworthy problems stem from our enculturated acceptance of “hard science” as the most appropriate means to address peopling-related questions. Like materialist theory and the physical record, both contribute in real ways to our failure to recognize and understand PaleoIndigenous humanity. First, we rely unduly and sometimes uncritically on ecological modeling to generate our “insights” into First Peoples’ decision making. Second, we too readily accept and too often overreach the genetic data that grace the pages of *Science* and *Nature* and our other go-to journals.

In the abstract, modeling can reveal instances when First Peoples did not act in ways that external conditions—those we can identify and translate into numbers—predict they would. On the face of it, that is a clever means to illuminate distinctly human choices. However, I think we sometimes forget that modeling can only work as well as the variables (s)he identifies as salient and the values the modeler assigns to them. Both are products of the *modeler’s* cultural logic, and so model output may say more about the modeler’s likely response to Pleistocene conditions than those of the First Peoples who lived them.

Molecular anthropology, like modeling, can be and has been an important tool in our methodological tool kit. Problems arise, however, when peopling archaeologists lacking in-depth training in genetics draw conclusions those data cannot support, instead blindly trusting that the products of “harder sciences” will necessarily steer them in the right direction. They also occur when geneticists, lacking in-depth training in archaeology, draw conclusions that anthropological principles do not support. Both scenarios play out regularly in the high-impact journals that, for better or worse, inform public understanding of peopling.

To the extent that this occurs, it can clearly perpetuate fanciful stories about who initially settled the Western Hemisphere, when, and from where. When the studies involve ancient DNA, the sample sizes are so small that any resulting generalization about continent-scale peopling will be incomplete and perhaps misguided or wrong (Dillehay 2021). The fact that each new DNA analysis of a very ancient ancestor leads to revised inter- and intracontinental migration scenarios testifies to this.

Even more problematically, rights now accorded to living human subjects are often not applied in studies of aDNA, particularly very ancient DNA. This is an especially acute issue for peopling archaeologists and geneticists working in the shadow cast by the legal battle over the treatment of the bodily remains of the Ancient One (Kennewick Man) from the 1990s to 2010s. That court case eroded already limited trust between archaeologists and members of many Indigenous communities. From the vantage of the latter, genetic studies—and for that matter, osteological ones—performed without their express buy-in and collaboration are fundamentally dehumanizing. I find it hard to argue.

Before transitioning to discuss solutions to the problems that plague the Western Hemisphere’s peopling scholarship, I want to emphasize a point I made in my introduction. Our problems are not unique to our niche. The variables I have attempted to articulate above, together with our “Folsom” archaeological origin story, are unique to us and have led to a particularly disappointing state of the art and unnecessarily

high levels of distrust among stakeholders within and outside the niche.

However, other archaeological domains are the products of their own tangled structural and historic webs. I suspect that those webs that share the most fibers in common with ours are more similarly mired in dehumanized scholarship, whereas those that do not—that have, for instance, younger and/or better-preserved empirical records, show greater respect for human remains, enjoy a less divisive history, and/or have pushed theoretical boundaries harder than we have—have better recognized and elevated the humanity of Indigenous ancestors.

I again encourage readers to think about the states of *their* arts, as well as the degree to which their personal scholarship does or does not breathe life into the people they study. In the “Rehumanization” section that follows, I explore ways that creative peopling colleagues have worked to break our unproductive feedback loop and thereby humanize our practice and interpretations. I hope this inspires additional efforts in my own scholarly community, but equally in others with humanizing work to do.

### **Rehumanizing Pleistocene People of the Western Hemisphere (The Solutions)**

#### *Humanizing Thought*

Changing how we think is probably our toughest challenge because our cognition reflects so fundamentally who we are and how we were enculturated. Still, there are at least two ways we might go about it. First, we can recruit and support a more diverse body of peopling archaeologists so that we are less likely to think alike in the first place. Second, each of us can own our identity and self-reflexively evaluate how it shapes our thinking and scholarship—from problem formulation through data dissemination. Recognizing the lenses through which we study the world is a first step to switching up their hue.

To the first point, I believe that we need more archaeologists like Paulette Steeves (e.g., 2015, 2017, 2021). Steeves is a Cree-Métis scholar who embraces peopling archaeology because it generates knowledge that can improve the well-



being of Indigenous people. Whereas colonialism worked to erase Indigenous people and to sever them from their deep roots, peopling archaeology at its best can offer restorative justice. For Steeves, a peopling that accords Paleo-Indigenous ancestors their hard-won early arrival can inspire and help heal the wounds of descendants still suffering the very real effects of colonialism. That is an outcome far removed from what Western science might deem relevant, but it is one ripe with potential for those who genuinely want their work to have—in National Science Foundation parlance—“broader impacts.”

Latin American scholars also bring crucial diversity of thought and training to the table. A volume edited by Rafael Suárez and Ciprian Ardelean (2019), for example, showcases Latin American peopling scholars and begins with a preface titled “An Upside-Down View.” Suárez and Ardelean note explicitly the tendency for the South American peopling record to have been interpreted in terms of ideas and terminology developed for North America, and the need—addressed by the volume’s diverse authors—to understand South American peopling on its own terms.

As feminist archaeology has argued for decades, women bring unique lived experiences to our scholarship, which can lead us to ask different questions, emphasize different variables, and draw conclusions that are different from those of men—all good reasons for cultivating our presence in peopling archaeology. Yet, my “fellow” women remain a distinct minority (try another scan of any recent SAA program’s peopling sessions if you doubt this). Going forward, we can and should do more to encourage talented young women to join and—just as important—to remain among our ranks.

When it comes to attending to our own cognition, I acknowledge that self-reflection is neither easy nor comfortable, particularly for positivists acculturated to believe that who we are is irrelevant to the “objective” science we do. But when we lay bare our identity, we create the space to ask how it has shaped our decision making—even and especially when we are engaged in science—and to navigate our way to making choices that recognize and honor the humanity of past and present people.

Jim Adovasio did this to good effect in his book *The First Americans: In Pursuit of Archaeology’s Greatest Mystery* (Adovasio and Page 2002). Written for a popular audience, Adovasio used his “Acknowledgments” and “Overture” to transparently convey who he is, how he came to be, what and who he values, and other details that help readers contextualize his peopling narrative. We are all trained to interrogate others this way; a good peer review considers the biases of the writer. We simply need to train that reviewer’s gaze upon ourselves more consciously and consistently.

For those (fairly) wondering, I have tried to practice what I am preaching during these years of my own intellectual unrest. Although not enjoyable, it has been enlightening. I now better understand the extent to which my white, middle-class upbringing and status—together with my 1990s training at the University of Arizona—have constrained my ability to draw conclusions about anything outside of that frame of reference. That does not mean I have been wrong about everything I have ever said, but I have no doubt that there are myriad ways I could have come closer to “right.”

That said, my reflections have also revealed a couple of silver linings. First, by more fully understanding who I am and have been, I find myself more open to new ways of learning and knowing—whether my own or by my students, colleagues, or anyone else with lessons to impart. I think this makes me a better teacher, researcher, colleague, and community member than I have been in the past. And a bonus: I find myself well equipped to evaluate white, middle-class, positivist perspectives of First Peoples.

### *Humanizing Language*

Changing how we think will require time and practice, but we can change the way we speak and write more quickly and in ways that better respect the humanity of living people. Eldon Yellowhorn (2003), for example, suggests elevating Indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere to a world stage by broadening categories such as “Paleoindian” to “Upper Paleolithic” and “Archaic” to “Epipaleolithic.” I appreciate and acknowledge Yellowhorn’s point, although I did not adopt this convention because the term

“Upper Paleolithic” carries its own linguistic baggage in a Western Hemispheric peopling context.

Yellowhorn’s work clearly influenced Paulette Steeves (e.g., 2015), who offers guidance that I have adopted in this article and will continue to use going forward, and, I believe, without sacrificing meaning. Steeves suggests replacing the term “First Americans” with “First Peoples;” the words “Paleoindian” and “Paleoamerican” with “PaleoIndigenous;” and “Americas” and “New World” with “Western Hemisphere.” These substitutions replace colonial referents with more neutral ones, which acknowledges the experiences of living descendants.

If changing our terminology is straightforward, expanding our lexicon in a conscious effort to enrich the way that we conceptualize and discuss First Peoples’ motivations and behaviors may require more effort. Colleagues working in more recent time periods (e.g., Southwesternists and Southeasternists) often do this through collaboration with descendants, whose oral traditions can supply the words that elude archaeologists. Peopling scholars may doubt that such an approach could bear fruit given the more than 10 millennia separating descendants from their Pleistocene ancestors. However, we would do well to remember that for many Indigenous people, time is not linear, and what may seem impossibly distant to us may be entirely accessible to them. So why not respectfully reach out to Indigenous knowledge keepers to try to learn about what we might be missing and how to talk about it?

We can better respect our *own* humanity by continuing to detoxify our rhetoric. I believe that one’s general outlook holds the key to positive, productive communication. Scholars who view themselves with humility and assume the best of their colleagues (that they are well trained, ethical, and hard working) tend to communicate in ways consonant with that worldview. The late George Frison always modeled this ethic, as his delightful memoir, *Rancher Archaeologist* (2014), illustrates and explains. By following Frison’s “keep it pleasant” lead, we can all contribute to more humane peopling discourse.

I can think of one other way we can use language to more fully actualize First Peoples:

every time we speak or write, we can pretend we are addressing nonarchaeologists. I love to receive my copy of the *Mammoth Trumpet* (*MT*) news magazine every few months, and I bet my peopling colleagues do too. Published by the Center for the Study of the First Americans at Texas A&M, *MT* reports cutting-edge peopling research to scientists and the public. Most *MT* authors are writers (not archaeologists) by trade, trained to breathe life into even fictional characters that must resonate as “real” when they are not. They draw on that training to humanize First Peoples, who really *were* real. For example, *MT* contributors allow the scientists in their narratives to speak in the first person, they avoid jargon, and they privilege the active voice. Peopling archaeologists who adopt these sorts of rhetorical strategies in their peer-reviewed work—David Meltzer is an example of someone who consistently does this—achieve the same general effect.

#### *Humanizing Practice*

Our speech and writing, of course, reflect and reinforce other interrelated elements of the practice of peopling archaeology, including theory, approaches to peopling problems, and the archaeological record itself.

*Theory.* I said earlier that, more than most Americanist archaeological traditions, peopling has hewed closely to processualism, with its emphasis on the scientific method and external, techno-environmental drivers of human decision making and cultural change. However, a few intrepid souls have experimented with postprocessual approaches to peopling questions—asking nonmaterialist questions and entertaining nonmaterialist explanations—and in this way have foregrounded First Peoples’ agency.

For example, in their article “Imagining Clovis as a Cultural Revitalization Movement,” Bruce Bradley and Michael Collins (2013) suggested that rather than interpreting the iconic Clovis tool kit as a response to economic concerns as most have done, it is better to view it as the tangible expression of a revitalization movement initiated by First Peoples to unify groups across North America. Their model accords First Peoples social agency that many economic models do not, but in a way that nevertheless allows generation of testable hypotheses.

María Nieves Zedeño adopted a similar stance in her 2017 article “Bison Hunters and the Rocky Mountains: An Evolving Partnership.” She recognizes the economic importance of bison and other tangible Rocky Mountain resources to the Blackfoot and their deep-time ancestors. However, she also maintains that because the Rockies were central to Blackfoot and ancestral Blackfoot ethnicity, cosmology, and territoriality, these social variables must also be considered when attempting to interpret the more than 10,000-year-old archaeological record of the Rocky Mountain Front.

In 2018, Zedeño built on this theme, exploring how large-scale hunting defined group identity and territories among the ancestral Blackfoot. In fact, the volume in which her piece appeared, *The Archaeology of Large-Scale Manipulation of Prey: The Economic and Social Dynamics of Mass Hunting* (2018), operates from the premise that *all* large-scale hunting—and related activities such as projectile point manufacture—occurred as much for social as for subsistence reasons (Bement 2018; Speth 2018).

Ashley Smallwood, Thomas Jennings, and Charlotte Pevny (2018) offer a final example of researchers striving to break with a strictly materialist posture in their article exploring First Peoples’ ritual expression at the Sloan site. They ultimately drew conclusions still heavily informed by ecological theory, but they operated under the premise that for First Peoples, ritual and daily life were interwoven. Hard as that duality may be to “see” archaeologically, it is necessarily captured not just at Sloan but at early sites more generally. To properly understand those sites, we must acknowledge that duality.

Going forward, peopling scholarship will grow when we ask new questions and broaden our suites of working hypotheses, both of which require pushing our materialist theoretical boundaries. Kintigh and colleagues (2014) provided useful guidance for doing this in their “Grand Challenges for Archaeology.” Of the discipline’s five topical domains, nearly all peopling archaeologists work within just two mentioned by Kintigh and colleagues (2014:880): “movement, mobility, and migration” and “human-environment interaction.”

I suggest we try embracing the other three—“emergence, communities, and complexity;” “resilience, persistence, transformation, and collapse;” and “cognition, behavior, and identity”—which may help us pose questions and entertain prospective answers that position us to learn about PaleoIndigenous social, emotional, and intellectual lives.

*Approaches.* Two related approaches may help peopling archaeologists humanize their research programs. Community archaeology (CA) and Indigenous archaeology (IA) both place contemporary people—not the archaeological record—at the center of the research process. Both also prioritize outcomes that benefit partner communities over archaeological interpretations, reorienting the goals of the Western positivism that still dominates the peopling domain.

When working within a CA paradigm (Atalay 2012), the archaeologist partners with communities—local, Indigenous, landowner, and others—with coinciding interests. Together, the partners define research questions, develop a research design, and craft products that benefit all involved. This is not familiar territory for most peopling archaeologists. However, a robust literature attests to its applicability across the globe and to problems in near and deeper time (e.g., Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; Jameson and Musteață 2019; Schmidt and Kehoe 2019).

Indigenous archaeology (Atalay 2006), similarly, privileges contemporary human concerns over archaeological interpretations, operating first and foremost to preserve Indigenous heritage and challenge inequality. Its methodologies build on those outlined in Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s landmark 1999 book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, which are taught worldwide in Indigenous Studies and Native American Studies departments. Here again, a large literature, easily sampled in edited volumes (e.g., Bruchac et al. 2010; Porr and Matthews 2020; Silliman 2008) offers inspiration for peopling scholars who want to humanize their practice.

Both CA and IA represent fundamentally new approaches that for some peopling archaeologists may never be a comfortable fit. For those wishing to emphasize PaleoIndigenous humanity while

still operating within a more traditionally positivist paradigm or using familiar tools, several options offer proven or prospective records of success for people-centered problem solving. These include (but are certainly not limited to) spatial analysis, ethnoarchaeology, and ethnographic analogy.

Spatial analyses can work well to expose instances of human agency and decision making because they so often capture the material signatures of individuals and groups interacting with one another. Whatever else they may reflect, such interactions are, by definition, social. Margaret (Pegi) Jodry (1999) harnessed this reality in a peopling context with her spatial analysis of the Stewart's Cattle Guard Folsom site. There, she documented discrete activity areas that she linked to economic activities *and* to likely gendered use of space. The latter humanizes the site's residents and creates a model for further testing.

At a much larger scale of analysis, but in a similar vein, Khori Newlander (2018) noted that peopling archaeologists have long interpreted patterning in the distribution of tool stone as an indicator of economically motivated decision making. He rejects this premise, arguing that the interpretation of such patterns must consider not just the location of tool stone sources and other physical resources but also the presence of other people on shared cultural landscapes. His approach is inherently humanizing and, over time, may lead to more nuanced and realistic interpretations of First Peoples' motivations.

Perhaps ironically, ethnoarchaeology emerged as a key tool used by processual archaeologists of the 1960s and 1970s to build middle-range theory that links contemporary and past human behaviors to their material signatures. Few peopling scholars, however, have availed themselves of this approach, no doubt daunted by the challenge of responsibly bridging insights obtained under modern conditions with a past as distant and landscapes as different as those of the Ice Age. There are, however, exceptions.

Todd Surovell and colleagues (e.g., Haas et al. 2018, O'Brien and Surovell 2017), for example, lived with the Dukha, mobile Mongolian

reindeer herders, to learn how they use household and community space and what material signatures those uses create. Although not a collaborative, community-archaeology-style effort, by seeking insights among living people, Surovell's team nevertheless created a mechanism for enlivening interpretations of very early sites (e.g., Surovell and Waguespack 2007).

Ethnographic analogy, like ethnoarchaeology, has often been used to create middle-range theory bridging the archaeological record and the human behaviors that created it. And like ethnoarchaeology, its focus on living people humanizes the archaeological enterprise. Here too, however, peopling scholars have been understandably cautious, recognizing the perils of imposing analogies developed in contemporary contexts on a past as structurally different as that of the terminal Pleistocene.

Asa Randall and Kandace Hollenbach (2007) addressed this conundrum, offering both examples of how hunter-gatherer archaeologists have navigated the challenge and advice for peopling scholars wanting to try. They suggest avoiding direct historical analogies predicated on non-existent similarities between the past and present and recommend general comparative versions focused on human decision making. For Randall and Hollenbach, contextualizing contemporary and ethnographic choices in ways that recognize social variables can lead to recognition of social considerations in even the distant past. That process is fundamentally humanizing.

John Speth and colleagues (2013) showed precisely how this can work in their piece "Early Paleoindian Big-Game Hunting in North America: Provisioning or Politics?" They call out several of peopling's most entrenched premises (e.g., that First People predominantly hunted megafauna) as both environmentally deterministic and unrealistic. To support their case, they marshalled ethnohistoric and ethnographic data that show that hunter-gatherers who target big game often do so as much for political and social reasons as to fulfill subsistence or other purely economic needs.

What I find most noteworthy about Speth and colleagues' (2013) piece is not their argument but their characterization of it as "presumptuous and risky" and "speculative." It is none of those

things; it is well reasoned and supported with a robust body of evidence. They simply understand that they are speaking to colleagues who (a) may greet their piece with undue rhetorical toxicity, and (b) may have lost sight of their own anthropological training and the humanizing tools it affords, and who have sometimes responded unproductively to ideas that “rock the boat” (Speth et al. 2013:112).

On the subject of “rocking the boat,” I see a powerful correlation between peopling scholars willing to do the rocking and those most attuned to the phenomenal capacity and creativity of First Peoples. *Nothing* rocks the peopling boat like a proposal that humans flourished in the Western Hemisphere prior to Clovis time, originated anywhere but northeastern Asia, or navigated their way here by any means other than their own two feet. Yet for my money, nothing recognizes and honors the human spirit of First Peoples like the will to push back against entrenched and highly circumscribed expectations.

Knut Fladmark did this in 1979, when he published an article paving the way for a Pacific Rim peopling by boat—an idea since embraced and expanded by Jon Erlandson (e.g., 2013) and others. Tom Dillehay (e.g., Dillehay and Collins 1988) did it with his groundbreaking work at Monte Verde, the Chilean site that finally broke the Clovis bar. Dennis Stanford and Bruce Bradley (e.g., 2012) followed suit by suggesting that terminal Pleistocene people could have traversed the Atlantic Ocean, as did Steve Holen and colleagues (2017) in reporting human activity around 130,000 years ago at California’s Cerutti Mastodon site. Most recently, Ciprian Ardelean and colleagues (2020) proposed that people used a high-altitude Mexican cave prior to Clovis time, and Randy Haas and his colleagues (2020) proposed that women hunted in Pleistocene South America.

What unifies these scholars and others like them is not that they got everything—or necessarily *anything*—“right.” *It is that they did not impose limits on what First Peoples could accomplish.* They accorded Pleistocene people full power—full humanity—to craft their destinies in ways that white Western positivism traditionally has not, for all the fundamentally structural reasons I have discussed. Certainly,

those toeing the positivist line often (always?) strike back swiftly, framing themselves as defenders of careful science. But just as certainly, peopling archaeology’s greatest strides come when we grant Pleistocene people the capacity to have done absolutely anything they chose to do.

Other and often related peopling advances have come when we have fulfilled our *own* capacity to seek knowledge in “unorthodox” places. I suspect that is because when we must overcome great obstacles to *access* the archaeological record, we can better appreciate the obstacles overcome to *create* that record. I see this greater sense of possibility, for instance, in the scholarship of those who have sought evidence for First Peoples beneath oceans, lakes, and rivers. Examples include the work of Quentin Mackie and colleagues in the Pacific Northwest (e.g., Mackie et al. 2013); Dennis Stanford and colleagues (2014) in and along Chesapeake Bay; John O’Shea, Ashley Lemke, and others in Lake Huron (Lemke 2020; O’Shea et al. 2014); and Jessie Halligan and others (2016) in Florida’s Aucilla River.

For those hesitant to go quite as “all in” as underwater archaeology demands, we can and more often should seek inspiration from humanizing archaeologies conducted in other times and places in response to challenges paralleling our own (e.g., see Rockman [2003] and other contributions to the volume she coedited [Rockman and Steele 2003]). Although Australian peopling literature, for example, strikes me as constrained in many of the same ways as our own, a few researchers have sought to access Pleistocene symbolic and social behavior in ways that might be applicable to our peopling arena (e.g., Balme and Morse 2006; Brumm et al. 2017; Mulvaney 2013).

Similarly, archaeologists working with materially limited records in Paleolithic Eurasia have pushed the humanizing envelope in ways that could clearly inspire PaleoIndigenous archaeology. Archaeologists including Meg Conkey (e.g., Maher and Conkey 2019), Clive Gamble (e.g., 2004), and Colin Renfrew (e.g., 2009) have long led the way in this regard, and others (e.g., Sterling 2014; Stiner 2017) have followed suit. In the titles of just the five aforementioned



works, for example, the words “home,” “social,” “spiritual,” “meaning,” and “love” appear, signaling those researchers’ intentions to delve well beyond the techno-environmental lives of Paleolithic Europeans in directions I would love to see peopling scholarship go.

*The Archaeological Record.* A final way that peopling archaeologists have and can continue to elevate First Peoples’ humanity is by approaching the study of their material culture in creative ways. I noted previously that our scholarship has long focused on the dense bones and stones that disproportionately withstand the tests of time and formation processes. This has led, for instance, to a Clovis archaeology largely shaped by just 14 megafaunal kill sites and the single economic focus these materials most obviously represent (Grayson and Meltzer 2003). But even bones and stones can yield inferences beyond the techno-environmental for those willing to ask new questions and entertain noneconomic interpretations.

John Walthall and Brad Koldehoff (1998), for example, approached large “Sloan”-type spear points found in Dalton contexts in the Central Mississippi Valley this way, proposing that First People ceremonially exchanged them as a means of maintaining social alliances in the region. In similar fashion, Francis Robinson (2011) interpreted a small assemblage of well-crafted Early Holocene bifaces as a “ceremonial artifact deposit” that indicates to him the intentional demarcation of a special place in New York’s Hudson River Valley.

Several scholars—including Jason Gillespie (2007), David Kilby (2014), Doug Bamforth (2014), and me (Pitblado 2017)—have interpreted the bones and stones of Clovis caches as indicators of the intimate knowledge and landscape learning of some Terminal Pleistocene residents. That is not to say that those same artifacts do not speak to subsistence or technological accomplishments; they do. But they can also connect us to deeper layers of the human story, such as the Clovis “politics” of Speth and colleagues (2013) and the entangled mundane and ritual articulated by Smallwood and colleagues (2018).

Finds of the mineral red ochre—in mines (e.g., Wyoming’s Powars II [Frison et al. 2018]

and Chile’s San Ramón site [Salazar et al. 2011]), caches (e.g., the Fenn and Anzick sites [Frison and Bradley 1999; Rasmussen et al. 2014]), and even at kill sites (e.g., La Prele; Zarzycka et al. 2019)—point as surely to Paleo-Indigenous beliefs and ritual as they do techno-environmental activities. The same is true for early beads and ornaments (e.g., Asher et al. 2020; Holliday and Killick 2013; also see Jodry’s [2010] synthesis of such finds) and portable art such as the Clovis-era incised stones at the Gault site (Lemke et al. 2015) and the incision of the figure of a proboscidean on mineralized bone in Florida (Purdy et al. 2011).

Although we can and should eke more meaning out of the physically resistant remains most readily available to us, the ability to “humanize” clearly increases with the richness of the record itself. We should therefore particularly value early sites with the perishables that Adovasio and Dillehay (2020) argue can promote understandings beyond the purely economic. Monte Verde, for example, is not a seminal archaeological site simply because it yielded chronologically early evidence for the peopling process. Instead—at least for me—its importance stems from its unparalleled array of cordage, wooden artifacts, medicinal plants, and other perishables that have illuminated the social and emotional lives of some of the earliest PaleoIndigenous residents of this hemisphere (e.g., Dillehay et al. 2008).

In similar if more modest fashion, finds such as human coprolites and sagebrush rope at Oregon’s Paisley Cave (Jenkins et al. 2012), sagebrush sandals at Fort Rock Cave (also in Oregon) and other Far Western sites (Connolly et al. 2016), fiber bags and baskets (Smith and Barker 2017), and an early Holocene cache of Canada goose bones at Alabama’s Dust Cave (Walker 2010, 2020) have stimulated insights into the PaleoIndigenous experience that stones and megafaunal bones have not and perhaps cannot. As one of this manuscript’s reviewers noted, the very acts of excavating and interpreting perishables can humanize the *archaeologist*, enriching that individual’s interactions with the deep past.

Finally, of course, when First Peoples died, their loved ones honored their passing in ways

that (as impervious as the details may be to peopling archaeologists) reflect their beliefs and values. We have glimpsed this at sites including Hoyo Negro (Quintana Roo, Mexico; Chatters et al. 2014), Anzick (Montana; Rasmussen et al. 2014), Upward Sun River (Alaska; Potter et al. 2014), and Horn Shelter (Texas; Jodry and Owsley 2014). Few, I suspect, would argue that there is any surer way to access the humanity of First Peoples than through their very bodies and the accoutrements chosen by their dearest ones to accompany them in death.

*However*, many would—and many have—argued that just because we *can* most readily access PaleoIndigenous humanity through investigations of ancestors' remains and (or) the artifacts found with them does not mean that we *should* do so. Certainly, when circumstances and collaborations with living descendants lead to that outcome, we can rejoice in the synergy and proceed in ways that honor the deceased.

On the other hand, when living descendants privilege the needs of an ancestor and their communities over those of an archaeologist wanting to understand their past, we must first honor *their* humanity. That means that we must not deny that after 8,000 or 10,000 (or any other arbitrarily designated number of years) there *are* living descendants, nor should we insist that only science can reveal a “real” relationship between PaleoIndigenous and contemporary Indigenous people. No good—and much harm—comes from such stances, which are firmly rooted in the Western colonialist mindset I am challenging.

### Conclusion

As I conceptualized this essay, it had a lot of prospective frames and titles, including “On the Deteriorating Relevance of Paleoindian Archaeology,” “Grand Challenges in Paleoindian Archaeology,” and “What’s the Matter with Paleoindian Archaeology?” I rejected all of those as overly negative, overly presumptuous, or both. I also realized that none of those ways of organizing my thoughts effectively conveys what I think our problems *are*, or *why* they emerged and linger, or—most importantly—what talented colleagues have done and continue to do to address them.

Roughly 9,000 words later, I remain convinced that our foundational and still central issue is that peopling archaeology too often treats its “subjects” as just that: organisms without intellectual or emotional agency. We have done this not because we are awful people who believe that First Peoples were not fully capable, dynamic, animated human beings. To the contrary. Every peopling archaeologist I have ever known is sincerely humbled by the accomplishments of the people who graced the lands and waters of an Ice Age Western Hemisphere.

Instead, we have unconsciously dehumanized First Peoples by allowing ourselves to remain constrained by outdated and sometimes destructive structures that have—since the emergence of our niche—shaped the way we think, talk, and practice. The problem is not ours alone. The issues I raise and interweave in this essay inform the history and practice of all archaeological traditions to one degree or another. But some domains have been quicker to recognize and address those issues by embracing new ontologies, overhauling their theoretical arsenals, decolonizing their vocabulary, and recruiting and embracing non-white-male practitioners, including and especially descendants of those we seek to understand.

For peopling archaeology to thrive and have an audience broader than just our own small number of specialists, we need to continue to create space for humanism in a scholarly domain that has, since its inception, unduly privileged positivism. I am not suggesting that we do away with a scientific approach to the past, but I am saying that it is time to acknowledge and move beyond our own colonialist legacies. When we do that, we will ask new questions, cultivate new research partners, rejuvenate stale methodologies, and craft narratives that are more relevant to more people in the present. And *that* might be something to write a book about.

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