

Counter-Practices of Global Life: A Response to Claire Smith

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We had hoped for a substantive response around the argument presented in ‘What’s up with WAC?’, instead Claire Smith has responded with a list of what she styles as ‘errors of fact and errors of representation’. Nevertheless, we thank her for the attention with which she has read our paper, and we look forward to the ‘more discursive response’ which she indicates will be forthcoming. A careful reading of Smith’s response yields five points at which she correctly identifies errors of fact in our paper. So, for the sake of the record, and in the interests of getting this over with, here goes:

- It is correct that most of the books distributed through the Global Libraries Programme are new rather than second-hand;
- It is correct that Colombia’s bid for WAC-6 competed against Ireland rather than Jamaica, after Jamaica’s bid had been rejected;
- It is correct that the room of the WAC/ Rio Tinto meeting in Melbourne was not — literally — ‘full of lawyers’. Rather, the tone of the proceedings was legalistic, and significant Rio Tinto input came from ‘community agreements’ and ‘community relations’ specialists with legal training;
- The sentence ‘WAC would become an archaeological/scientific organization whose salaried office holders were paid by Rio Tinto’, should read ‘WAC would become an archaeological/scientific organization whose salaried secretariat was paid by Rio Tinto’;
- The countries proposed for the WAC/ Rio Tinto try-out were not Cameroon and Argentina as stated, but Gabon and Argentina.

The rest of what Smith describes as ‘errors of fact and errors of representation’ consist of a set of opinions, interpretations, the beginnings of counter-positions, and alternative (and, we would argue, often self-serving) readings of events. Smith’s response to our account of the Archaeologists Without Borders programme consists of additional information, plus a statement about possible future developments. Her account of the exclusion of Alejandro Haber from the WAC listserv dealing with the Rio Tinto encounter is perplexing: it is not that Haber was excluded from the listserv

(she writes), but that ‘the listserv ceased to operate’. Smith’s account of issues of confidentiality relating to the meeting between the WAC delegation and Rio Tinto is misleading. No undertaking around confidentiality was asked of us at any stage, nor would we have consented to any measures that prevented a full and open discussion with the WAC membership. The report on the meeting (watermarked ‘not for citation and circulation’) was, of course, produced after the meeting had taken place, and is not used by us as a source. Most of the sources used by us are freely available, on Rio Tinto’s own website, and in the substantial online literature dealing with anti-Rio Tinto campaigns and activities. The most interesting passage in this section is as follows: [Smith writes] ‘Each person who attended the meeting at the Melbourne Business School was in a relationship with Rio Tinto the moment they knowingly accepted funding from Rio Tinto to attend the meeting’. This is precisely why we argued against any further entanglement with a multinational described by some as ‘a byword for corporate malpractice’ (Taylor, 2011).

The point here is a point about transparency of operation and a principle of open access to information and unfettered debate. It is worth noting that the publication of our account in *Public Archaeology* was, for us, a last resort. In the months following the WAC/Rio Tinto meeting we tried to conduct this discussion as an internal, WAC discussion, using WAC structures and venues, but found ourselves blocked at every turn. Nor were we alone in this experience: colleagues who submitted questioning or critical accounts to the WAC listserv sometimes found their responses weeded out as part of an attempt to manage the debate around Rio Tinto. Driven by imperatives of profitability and competition, we would argue that some corporates can be paranoid, secretive, and hierarchical in their modes of operation. Right at the beginning of our encounter with Rio Tinto, we argued that WAC could not afford to take onboard such modes of operation which could be damaging to the organization or to compromise an absolute commitment to transparency of operation.

As a teaching exercise we showed Claire Smith’s response to our graduate classes. Reactions were wide-ranging, but most students were struck by the rhetorical framing of her paper. Rather than a scholarly process made up of debate, argumentation, position, and counter-position, Smith presents a world of ‘facts’ and ‘errors’, with herself on the side of facts. The most frequently used adjectives to describe the two of us are ‘passionate’ and ‘committed’, like unruly children, enthusiastic but requiring firm guidance. At no point does she examine the assumptions underlying her own positions, which are not presented as positions but as facts. For example, it is stated as fact that Rio Tinto is ‘a leader in global corporations’, out to ‘set higher standards for the protection of people, community, cultural heritage, environment and their futures’. A general response is summarized by the following comment: ‘Her response is very procedural. It quotes at length from WAC and Rio Tinto policy documents, but does not really deal with the main points of the argument’.

So much for the record: the point of our paper was not to quibble about the past, but to talk in open and creative ways about the future. Our hope, going forward, is that we can turn this into a substantive debate around a set of issues that are transforming not only the world of WAC, but worlds of practice in the discipline at large. In the interests of fostering such debate, we repeat the main points of the argument presented in ‘What’s up with WAC?’, taking up Claire Smith’s response at two key

points: the question of Rio Tinto, and the question of the Indigenous. First the main points of our argument:

- In its current incarnation — by which we mean the post-WAC-5 version of the organization — WAC has lost, or been stripped of, a project of disciplinary critique and self-examination. This was certainly part of the original framing of WAC. The WAC of the mid-1980s was many things, but it was above all an intervention in a politics of knowledge in the discipline.
- As a result of this loss, WAC tends uncritically to reproduce dominant modes of global practice. These are typically conceived as forms of development aid, which ‘reach out’ from the global north to the global south. The consequences of this may be merely ironic, as in the case of well-intentioned programmes like Global Libraries and Archaeologists Without Borders, which reproduce a basically colonial division of labour in the discipline. Or they may be more damaging as in the case of WAC’s adventure with Rio Tinto.
- As a way of conceptualizing this nexus, we draw on the work of decolonial theorists like Arturo Escobar and Walter D. Mignolo. They describe a world which, in some ways, is more sharply divided than the world of WAC’s founding, the world of the mid-1980s. Resource squeeze and the pressure of ever-increasing development mean that global capital in the form of multinational mining interests, agri-business, pharmaceuticals interests, mega-infrastructure projects (and so on) now have their eye on and reach into the last remaining territories and outposts of the world. These kinds of ‘global designs’, and this kind of aggressive intervention at the level of the local, are what the decolonial theorists describe as ‘colonial globality’.
- Archaeologists and anthropologists are not peripheral to this process: in some ways they are central to it. There is a sense in which the local evades easy capture, or ‘reading’, by global capital interests: it can present a set of opaque ontologies, or obstructive practices of everyday life. Many of the final remaining territories that have thus far evaded complete capture by global capital are under Indigenous control, or under the control of otherwise conceived subaltern groups (Indigenous groups in the Southern Andes, Afro-descended populations on Colombia’s Pacific coast, the San of Southern Africa, and so on). Archaeologists and anthropologists who go to work for global capital act as brokers and intermediaries, smoothing, facilitating, and enabling the vertical relationship between global capital and multinational interests, on the one hand, and locally emplaced resources and ways of life, on the other. Catherine Coumans (2011) has recently theorized this nexus through the provocative notion of ‘embedded anthropology’ (and, in a slightly different context, see Rene Teiggeler’s and Yannis Hamilakis’s notion of ‘embedded archaeology’ (Teiggeler, 2008; Hamilakis, 2009)).
- The key passage from our paper in this regard is as follows: ‘In the battle between localization and globalization, archaeology plays a central role. It translates (transforms) locality (antiquities, ways of life, landscapes, knowledges) into a global discourse (the archaeological resource, the disciplinary object, heritage), fostering and enabling global intervention beyond the marks of local history. In these terms, to be archaeologized is to be captured, disciplined,

interpolated to a set of global disciplinary discourses'. This notion of an instrumentalized form of the discipline in the service of global capital is one that we describe as 'Archaeology Inc.'.

- The terms of WAC's proposed relationship with Rio Tinto perfectly exemplify this form of intervention. There is a lot of the usual sort of aspirational language, some of which is repeated in Smith's response, but underneath it all our understanding is that WAC would make its network of practitioners available to Rio Tinto to facilitate access to territories and resources as a 'trusted broker', which is how Rio Tinto conceptualizes the role of such persons.
- The WAC/ Rio Tinto adventure represents an extreme instance of this kind of vertical intervention. A more everyday, and certainly more significant, instance has been the advent of cultural resource management. The global proliferation of CRM discourse and protocols over the last two decades has transformed worlds of practice in archaeology, perhaps more than any other current set of processes or body of theory. CRM is certainly a complex phenomenon with multiple forms, and requires careful analysis, but in one of these forms it represents the wholesale advent of 'Archaeology Inc.'.

Such are the challenges and urgencies of contemporary contexts of practice in archaeology, at least in our version. To repeat an earlier point about framing: these are positions — in some ways, quite extreme and dire positions — and require engaging with as such. They are not asserted as 'facts'. Somebody somewhere conceivably needs to draft a set of positions in favour of archaeological interventions alongside mining multinationals like Rio Tinto, and its ameliorative effects at the level of the local. These are the assumptions underlying the discourse of Claire Smith and Rio Tinto, although they are never stated as such but are simply assumed. Smith's advocacy role on behalf of Rio Tinto is a matter of public record. In their book *Digging it up Down Under: A Practical Guide to Doing Archaeology in Australia*, published in 2007, around the time of the WAC/Rio Tinto meeting, Claire Smith and Heather Burke write that Rio Tinto has become 'a major player in the sphere of archaeological employment' in Australia. They continue: 'This is done as part of its commitment to achieving enduring, mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal communities' (Smith and Burke, 2007: 9). They note that Rio Tinto had, at that date, over seventy mine development and land access agreements with Aboriginal Traditional Owner groups. They write: 'Company cultural heritage management standards and professional staffing helps Rio Tinto to meet its commitments in these agreements and to work in partnership with Aboriginal communities for the protection of their heritage' (9). While earlier experiences with 'mine developments such as Marandoo led to serious conflict with Aboriginal groups and significant losses to the company', these are described as being in the past. They quote Elizabeth Bradshaw, an archaeologist employed by Rio Tinto who was instrumental in setting up the WAC/Rio Tinto meeting: 'being part of a mining company that has this approach is no longer 'working for the enemy'' (9).

At the WAC/Rio Tinto meeting, Smith and Bradshaw were at pains to describe Rio Tinto's environmental and human rights abuses as a thing of the past. Ironically, on 9 September 2008, almost exactly a year after the WAC/Rio Tinto meeting, the Norwegian government announced that it was blacklisting Rio Tinto and liquidating

its \$1bn investment in the company for ‘grossly unethical conduct’. Attention was focused on Rio Tinto’s record at its Grasberg mine in West Papua, where continued association ran ‘the unacceptable risk’ of contributing to ‘severe environmental damage’. The move followed years of dialogue between Norwegian government officials and Rio Tinto:

Rio Tinto had faced a litany of signposts indicating that multinational and Indonesian involvement in West Papua was not meeting various standards, laws, and norms: Institutions such as the World Bank, the Australian Council for Overseas Aid, the International Finance Corporation, the Overseas Private Investment Commission, the United Nations Committee against Torture, the US State Department, and the Indonesian Environment Ministry, as well as many US and European politicians, independent environmental assessments, international media, Papuan leaders, civil society groups, and shareholders had brought the problems to Rio Tinto’s attention. (Taylor, 2011)

Presumably such representations had little effect. We want to be clear about our own position. Claire Smith has every right to hold her position and to write in defence of Rio Tinto. However, we consider that a problem comes about when such a position and the assumptions that underlie it, restated as facts, guide organizational policy in WAC. A further problem arises when the subsequent debate is shut down in the interests of protecting a proprietorial relationship with Rio Tinto.

In the final section of our paper we attempt ‘an exercise in decolonial thinking’ in considering questions of the Indigenous. This is a difficult and a potentially risky move. Such questions are complex and need careful elucidation: to attempt to outline a position in a handful of pages risks a misreading. We begin by noting that the notion of the Indigenous exists in a double sense: first, as a term originating in discourses of the West to denote ways of life and modes of experience which are Other to the Western self; second, as a resistant term, around which is organized a politics of identity that contests precisely the kinds of appropriations that we describe above. Indeed, the growth of the Indigenous Movement over the last few decades constitutes a singular feature of contemporary contexts of practice, in some ways acting as a foil to the proliferation of CRM discourse. In this second, resistant sense, it takes many of the tropes of Western notions of the Indigenous (timelessness, distinctiveness, investment in locality) and recapitulates them, valorizing them as providing the elements of a counter-modernity. It may be important to note that as an instance of what Spivak has called ‘strategic essentialism’ we fully accept the importance and efficacy of such a strategy.

Our intervention is directed specifically at questions of knowledge, where we attempt two moves: first, to attempt to shift out of the binarism of such approaches; second, to focus on the epistemic challenge posed by local and Indigenous knowledges to disciplinary archaeology. By epistemic challenge, we mean their potential to problematize and transform disciplinary guiding ideas and practices, which we view, approvingly, as an essential part of a decolonial archaeology. The central point of our critique is that standard disciplinary approaches frame a qualified encounter with the Indigenous, which we would describe as: essentialized science meets essentialized identity. Framed as a question, we ask: how might we conceptualize an *unqualified* encounter, in which both disciplinary agent and Indigenous self meet as active

producers of knowledge, and conversely as people who bear a complex relation to locality and identity in a variety of ways? In the first of two key passages in this section of our text, we write of standard disciplinary approaches:

As a shorthand for this epistemic stance, we might say that it is about bringing the Indigenous into the space of the discipline (disciplining the Indigenous). So what would another form of practice look like, one which might be described as ‘bringing the discipline into the space of the Indigenous’, or better still (the position that we would subscribe to), opening a third space in which discipline and Indigenous might encounter one another free of the epistemic qualifiers of either the discipline (essentialized science) or the Indigenous (essentialized Identity)? What would be involved in conceptualizing such a space?

This is an attempt to think, as it were, inside and outside the binary. Recognizing the importance of notions of the Indigenous for a postcolonial politics of identity, it is an attempt to construct a thinking/articulating position which at the same time avoids some of their entrapments. At its heart is a call to deepen the seriousness of disciplinary engagements with the Indigenous, to move beyond the important ground of ontologies of respect and cultural norms to consider questions of knowledge themselves. In a second key passage, we write:

Framed in these terms, the challenge presented by notions of the Indigenous is both more complex and more embracing than that conceived by WAC. At the core of the notion of the Indigenous is an epistemic challenge to the discipline of archaeology, the challenge of ‘worlds differently known’. How do we recognize local, subaltern and fugitive knowledges of deep time (the gone past) as knowledge in its own right, and not as its Other (tradition/belief/superstition)? Rather than accepting the binary between Western self and Indigenous Other as a basis for a disciplinary project in archaeology, we should ask rather: What happens when the Indigenous is the self? Or when neither Western self nor Indigenous Other describes the position of the archaeologist self? How are we differently invested in locality?

Our intervention is presented as a thought experiment and a set of questions. We believe that this is important ground, which will come increasingly to frame archaeological debates and agendas. We welcome further engagement around these questions which take us out of a sound-bite style of debate to a deeper set of engagements.

So, where to from here? Our own notion of how to live and work as archaeologists in contemporary worlds of practice is articulated in terms of the notion of ‘counter-practices’ of the global. These are practices that self-consciously cut against the grain of standard, or mainstream, or hegemonic forms of practice. If hegemonic practices reinforce the position of global elites and enable their ‘global designs’, such counter-practices disturb and disrupt these designs, open the space for other conceptions of global and local life. Perverse on occasion, undisciplined, they have at their heart a deadly earnest: the seriousness of taking the world as we find it, not accepting an inherited set of formulations. WAC began as a form of counter-practice, gloriously discombobulating the old fogeys, jamming with accepted modes of disciplinary practice. The shorthand version of what we propose in our paper is a return to the fun, radicalism, and thoughtfulness of those early days.

Two points about such counter-practices. First, they can only be maintained on the basis of ongoing critique, debate, and sharp analysis. Circumstances change, and it is the nature of hegemonic discourses that they appropriate (or eat) resistant notions and practices. What seems radical at one point in history might be thoroughly co-opted ten or twenty years down the line. The second point is that such counter-practices are not distant and mysterious. For many of us they form the basis — or one basis — for everyday life and practice. The spectacular growth of social movements organized around a host of issues is a feature of contemporary worlds of practice to which we have already alluded. At the core of many of these movements is an impatience with the false promises and destructive practices of global modernity, and a commitment to developing counter-practices of global life. As a first and obvious step, it is with such organizations that WAC should be partnering, rather than with compromised and discredited transnationals like Rio Tinto. The task that lies before us is the task of articulating such counter-practices as the basis for an organizational platform, in which we reconceptualize our role as archaeologists, in the discipline and in the world.

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