



## Debate Response

# The past was diverse and deeply creative: a response to Bentley & O'Brien

Catherine J. Frieman<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> School of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia (✉ [catherine.frieman@anu.edu.au](mailto:catherine.frieman@anu.edu.au))

I want to preface this response by noting that, while I think Bentley, O'Brien and I fundamentally differ in how we approach the archaeological record (2024), I am also convinced that the more perspectives on the past we can cultivate, the richer our interpretative garden will be. Moreover, the more narratives of past worlds we develop, the more nuanced and complex our image of the past will become and, hence, the messier and more human (Frieman [in press](#)). I therefore write in the hopes that we can disagree with care, so that all of our scholarship is enriched.

American archaeology has a long and proud tradition of muscular position statements declaring the best and most scientific way of studying the past—and Bentley and O'Brien's contribution (2024) certainly finds its kin among these. Where it rebels against its parents is in its willingness to take seriously other modes of interpretation and traditions of scholarship—a fact for which I commend the authors. To an outsider, the scholarship of evolutionary archaeology often reads as quite endogamous; so, engaging beyond the traditional bounds of the subfield is a welcome innovation (may it prompt a cascade).

Bentley and O'Brien accuse a range of archaeologists, including me, of naively projecting our own reality into the past, creating a sort of 'self-insert fan fiction' in place of rigorous explanatory modelling. They argue that I and others overestimate the creativity and intentionality experienced by past peoples because so many of their technologies endured over millennia and their lives were characterised by repetitive labour.

Nearly 50 years ago, Bruce Trigger (1980) delineated with brutal precision how Americanist archaeology had both absorbed and promulgated deeply racist impressions of Indigenous and First Nations peoples as uncreative and resistant to change. Similar attitudes influenced archaeological practice in Australia through the 1970s (McNiven & Russell 2023: 25–28). As I have previously argued, the image of a conservative, unchanging and uncreative past represents enduring colonial imaginaries in which Anglo-Europeans, their material worlds, technologies and social practices are justified in their global domination by dint of their more dynamic (read: advanced, complex, evolved) social and technological worlds (Frieman 2021: 13–14, 2023).

Traditions are not exogenous to social practice, but emergent from it (Frieman 2021: 151–54, 169). They represent complex and deeply creative dialogues between contemporary

---

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Antiquity Publications Ltd. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the same Creative Commons licence is included and the original work is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use.

concerns and imagined pasts. Ideas and practices persist not because they are ancestral memories untouched by social practice, but because they are valued, recreated, manipulated, instrumentalised and enacted generation after generation. People are typically canny in their engagement with the past and tenacious in their efforts to maintain core values, with traditions, rites and practices altered or shifted as necessary to respond to a dynamic present and unknown future (McNiven & Russell 2023).

Kin relations, too, exist in a fluid space between social norms and the practical realities of daily life, from falling in love with someone outside the clan to the need to consolidate political or social cohesion in fraught situations. Kinship bonds represent shifting solidarities and practices of affiliation and boundary marking through the mobilisation of a variety of substances (McKinnon & Cannell 2013; Goldfarb & Schuster 2016). These relations are negotiated, manipulated and may well shift with age. This more complex framework does not map neatly onto bloodless diagrams of knowledge transmission, but it has the advantage of aligning closely with the messy realities of teaching and learning documented ethnographically, historically and sociologically (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Radiocarbon dating, innovations in statistical modelling, palaeogenomics and increasingly precise excavation techniques mean that we are finally beginning to grasp prehistory on the scale of an individual person's lifetime. We can see elements of their singular experiences, and sequence practices as they changed or persisted from one generation to the next (e.g. Mills *et al.* 2016). Bentley and O'Brien over-reach in attempting to apply an approach adapted for the broad scale of millennia to the small scale of human lives and generations. At the scale of the hand turning the flint core and the family placing their dead in the ground, agency and intentionality are necessarily present (Sofaer 2015).

The archaeological record is complicated, contradictory and inherently messy, reflecting the cacophonous diversity of life lived elsewhere and elsewhere. People were and are complex, they make choices, engage in debates and manipulate social norms and expectations. There is no contradiction between this understanding and the knowledge that for many people—past and present—life also means attending to animals, plastering walls and caring for children in ongoing, unending cycles. A life of care and manual labour is not an uncreative or unintentional one.

## References

- BENTLEY, R.A. & M.J. O'BRIEN. 2024. Cultural evolution as inheritance, not intentions. *Antiquity* 98. <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2024.63>
- FRIEMAN, C.J. 2021. *An archaeology of innovation: approaching social and technological change in human society*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- 2023. Innovation, continuity and the punctuated temporality of archaeological narratives, in A. McGrath, L. Rademaker & J. Troy (ed.) *Everywhen: knowing the past through language and culture*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- In press. Attending to unproof: an archaeology of possibilities. *Antiquity*.
- GOLDFARB, K.E. & C.E. SCHUSTER. 2016. Introduction: (de)materializing kinship—holding together mutuality and difference. *Social Analysis* 60: 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2016.600201>
- LAVE, J. & E. WENGER. 1991. *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McKINNON, S. & F. CANNELL (ed.) 2013. *Vital relations: modernity and the persistent life of kinship*. Santa Fe (CA): SAR Press.
- McNIVEN, I.J. & L. RUSSELL. 2023. *Innovation: knowledge and ingenuity*. Port Melbourne:

- Thames and Hudson with The National Museum of Australia.
- MILLS, B.J., J.J. CLARK & M.A. PEEPLES. 2016. Migration, skill, and the transformation of social networks in the pre-Hispanic Southwest. *Economic Anthropology* 3: 203–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sea2.12060>
- SOFAER, J.R. 2015. *Clay in the age of bronze: essays in the archaeology of prehistoric creativity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- TRIGGER, B.G. 1980. Archaeology and the image of the American Indian. *American Antiquity* 45: 662–76. <https://doi.org/10.2307/280140>