

Ethical Archaeologies: The Politics of Social Justice 1

Cristóbal Gnecco  
Dorothy Lippert  
*Editors*

# Ethics and Archaeological Praxis



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# Ethical Archaeologies: The Politics of Social Justice

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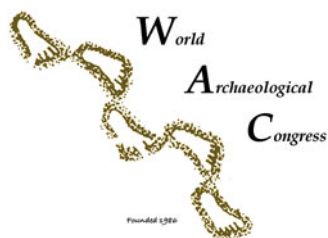
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Cristóbal Gnecco • Dorothy Lippert  
Editors

# Ethics and Archaeological Praxis

 Springer



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# Ethical Archaeologies: The Politics of Social Justice

Archaeology remains burdened by modern/Western values. Codified, these values harden into ethics with specific cultural and temporal foundations; indeed, ethics are contextual, shifting and negotiated entanglements of intent and practice that often conflict. Yet, archaeologists may uncritically mask these contexts unless they are adequately aware of the discipline's history and of their location in a globalised world order with its imprint of imperial, colonial and neocolonial values. A responsible and socially committed archaeology must historicise its ethical principles, showing how contingent they are and what kind of needs they are serving.

By adopting a global coverage that brings together academic activism for a historicised ethics, universally created lacunae surrounding disciplinary concepts, such as the archaeological record, stewardship and multivocality, as well as broader concerns of race, class and gender, can be discussed and acted upon. The four volumes comprising the *Ethical Archaeologies: The Politics of Social Justice Series* discuss historically based ethics in the practice of archaeology and related fields—anthropology, museology, indigenous and heritage studies, law and education—and highlight the struggle for social justice, in which the discipline can participate.

In this series we accept that social justice is broadly about equality and the right to freedom from any kind of discrimination or abuse. It is about seeking to transform the current order of the world, in which the hegemony of the Western cosmology still reigns with its ideas of individuality, linear time, development, competition and progress. Thus, social justice is also about the positioning in our research and disciplinary practices of non-modern values about life, time, past, place and heritage.

Hardened into reified principles, as they continue to be, ethical concerns have served to reproduce epistemic hierarchies and privileges. If archaeologists are content with what the ethical preoccupations of the last two decades have achieved, their trumpeted engagement with politics and justice is meaningless. If the ethics of archaeology continues to simply further embed disciplinary privileges, social justice is not a horizon of fulfilment. If ethics is just a disciplinary preoccupation, a

way of better accommodating the discipline to changing times, social justice is an empty expression. For these reasons, this series aims to position the values of equality and freedom from all discrimination at the centre of archaeological thinking and practice. The four volumes are not toolkits or guides for standardised, universal, ethical conduct, but critically informed, self-reflective discussions of ethical problems and potentials.

Cristóbal Gnecco  
Tracy Ireland

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# Chapter 1

## An Entanglement of Sorts: Archaeology, Ethics, Praxis, Multiculturalism

Cristóbal Gnecco

Since their worldwide adoption some two decades ago, ethical principles/codes in archaeology have been subjected to a sustained critique. The main argument is that they have been naturalized. The moral *good*, always historical, has been reified, ignoring (or, perhaps, knowing full well) that what is *good* for a given society is context-dependent. For many archaeologists, ethical principles have frozen reflexivity and the will to change (if it ever existed). The preoccupation voiced by some (Tarlow 2001; Meskell and Pels 2005; Hamilakis 2007) about the reification of ethics (with the consequent elimination of any traces of historicity and happening) has now become a certainty.

To move beyond ethics as a reified set of principles history is needed. As a contribution to this end, the papers in this book seek to assess *ethics* in archaeology through *praxis* in the understanding that the two cannot (should not) be separated, ever. Ethics is not an absolute term. If considered as a set of principles of right conduct or a theory or a system of moral values, ethics entails a historical condition for it condenses the moral thinking of a society on specific times and places but not in others. Ethics is unavoidably nested in historical relations. Yet, it normally is reified, as if it were an anthropological universal. Restoring the historicity and plurality of archaeological ethics is a task to which this book is devoted; its emphasis on praxis mends the historical condition of ethics. In doing so, it shows that nowadays a multicultural (sometimes also called “public”) ethics looms large in the discipline. By engaging communities “differently,” archaeology has explicitly adopted an ethical outlook, purportedly striving to overcome its colonial ontology and metaphysics. In this new scenario, the respect for other historical systems/worldviews and

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social accountability appear to be prominent. Being and behaving ethically in archaeological terms in the multicultural context has become mandatory, so much that most professional, international and national archaeological associations have ethical principles as guiding forces behind their openness towards social sectors traditionally ignored or marginalized by their practices.

Ethical concerns in archaeology were rare a few decades ago but became frequent in the last 20 years. The emergence of ethics in the discipline—a common preoccupation turned professional proscription and prescription—may have occurred some 40 years ago, but its popularity (which, at the same time, is a symptom) ripened alongside the transformation of national societies into multicultural ones. The entangled relationship between archaeology and the recent course of the West created new conditions for the discipline, which in due course activated mechanisms of adaptation; amongst them ethical principles stand out. What demanded their appearance? I hold that they are disciplinary responses to global changes associated with multiculturalism. Yet, to avoid *contextualism*—which implies the modern division between facts, power, and discourse—it is necessary to describe the links that allows politics and society to influence knowledge and ideas and vice versa. This can be the task: not understanding archaeological ethics in its context neither showing the operation of political pressures over it but showing how “a science, a context, and a demarcation between the two” (Latour 1993:16) became not only possible but *real*. In doing so, perhaps the first issue that comes to the fore is the parochialism of archaeological ethics and, at the same time, its violent universalism.

The papers in this book are symptoms of what archaeological ethics is nowadays as seen from praxis. While some papers express disappointment, some others believe that two decades of ethical discussions (and principles) have done well to archaeology by turning it more sensitive to contemporary issues, more accountable for its actions, and more responsible to the demands of different publics. The different assessments expressed in the papers are expressions of the political and academic positioning of their writers. These telling differences not only point to issues already debated, such as the need to go political and the need to overcome reification, but to another issue as well: archaeological ethics are mostly self-contained, disciplinary, and self-serving; they engage the world from within disciplinary limits and from within the cosmology of modernity. These issues do not amount to a putative lag between ethics as theory and ethics as practice, as if what was established in principles were summarily violated in action. The point is how a global ethics (which I will call *multicultural ethics*) shapes what archaeologists do; and what they do is what an assessment of their praxis tells us they do.

Have ethics in archaeology changed the discipline or hardened it? Has it worked towards social justice, a rhetorical horizon to where the discipline seemed willing to go since it became conscious of its modern/colonial origins and effects? Further, can archaeology have ethical principles committed to social justice if, at the same time, it strengthens its relationship with the market and development? Is this coincidence just mere haphazard or it obeys more structural rules? The papers in this book try to answer these questions by examining praxis-based contexts in which archaeological ethics unfolds. The book is about archaeological ethics today. That means that the

papers bring into the picture the principal elements/changes that have shaped such a contemporary ethics: the global multicultural rhetoric and its local adoptions; the public (broadly including the grass-roots challenge and opposition to academic, positivist archaeology); and the widespread interventions of development.

Archaeological ethics has also had another effect: the creation and/or delimitation of archaeological values that were formerly vague and undefined—and some of which didn't even exist. Thus, commitment to a sound (fair, true) interpretation of the past, to sound disciplinary practices (swift publication, adequate curation of findings), to stewardship, to social responsibility, have emerged as the values the archaeologists must abide to. In this regard, two groups of (rarely interrelated) values have been formed: (a) disciplinary values, to which archaeologists seem to abide willingly (no wonder, since they strengthen and protect the profession); and (b) contextual values, which they address reluctantly because they have the potential to upset the discipline (as it has happened with repatriation, an unintended result of social accountability). For instance, the principles of archaeological ethics of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA 1996) are stewardship, accountability, commercialization, public education and outreach, intellectual property, public reporting and publication, records and preservation, and training and resources. Except for accountability, which expressly states the need to consult with affected groups in order to “establishing a working relationship that can be beneficial to all parties involved,” all other values are disciplinary, based on the reified, undisputed existence of the archaeological record—perhaps the main actor in all ethical principles (see Hamilakis 2007:23)—and on the Enlightened, humanistic, and universal *nature* of the archaeological endeavor. As I will show further down, both groups of values are modern (but also multicultural) and unveil the ontology of which archaeology partakes.

Ethics is a liberating force: as far as the archaeologists comply with their basic precepts (mostly disciplinary), they are free (politically and psychologically) to go on with their usual trade, which more often than not entails a great dose of self-isolation. Ethics is an important part of the postmodern turn in archaeology. It “modifies” the relationship with the Other (I will sketch further down what this “modification” is all about) but it helps to keep intact the modern/colonial structuring of archaeological thought. Further, it helps to avoid thinking and acting reflexively and hinders actual transformations. It hinders, specially, a true different relationship with Otherness. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003:28) noted about related events in anthropology:

This recurring refusal to pursue further the archaeological exercise obscures the asymmetrical position of the savage-other in the thematic field upon which anthropology was premised. It negates the specificity of otherness, subsuming the Other in the sameness of the text perceived as liberating cooperation.

In this case, the Other is subsumed in the sameness of the ethical code, premised as a liberating cooperation. In the absence of a thorough discussion about power, capitalism, multiculturalism, and inequalities, that is, about contextual conditions (including, as I mentioned before, the conditions that permit the separation of discipline and context in the first place), ethics is meaningless, especially if social justice is at stake.

## Multiculturalism, Archaeology, and Ethics

Archaeological discourses related to the creation and functioning of national societies have lost momentum and significance given the emergence of multiculturalism, which has the main tenets of modern societies crumbling, especially the construction of unified collectivities (national societies) in terms of culture, language, and history. In the last two or three decades multiculturalism has set in motion profound changes, especially regarding the organization of society, which is now premised upon the coexistence of diverse constituencies—conventionally referred to as *cultural diversity*. The multicultural idea of diversity hides differences and inequalities by eliminating historical specificities, processes of othering, asymmetries, and power relations.

Archaeology has been so shaped by this social order that a multicultural archaeology has emerged. In order to keep up with multicultural changes (which, by the way, archaeology has not promoted but to which it has to accommodate, often unwillingly), profound as they are, archaeology has basically done four things: (a) it has opened its practice to local actors; (b) it has widened the circulation of its discourse; (c) it has included other historical horizons in its interpretations; and, (d) it has given up the exclusive control of some disputed issues. Let me examine those four things. Firstly, the open practice it champions has only allowed local actors to be members of research teams or, the most, to be trained in the discipline. Such openness has normally been framed under the heading “collaboration” but power relations are rarely at stake. Most archaeologists are content to offer cultural crumbs to the communities (a local museum, a video, a booklet) while preserving the control of key issues (research designs, destination of findings, production and dissemination of narratives). Secondly, a widened circulation of archaeological discourses—which, along with collaboration, forms the backbone of public archaeology, part and parcel of a more comprehensive entity that I have chosen to call *multicultural archaeology*—has had two results: it reproduces the archaeological canon more widely and it furthers the reification and objectification of the past, such as in the case of local museums, which have sprouted everywhere. Thirdly, an expanded archaeological hermeneutics, achieved by incorporating non-Western conceptions (of the past, time, etc.), has doubtlessly enriched the explanatory potential of the discipline but has not engaged intercultural understandings. Such an interpretative expansion, many times resorting to alien cosmologies that produce curious argumentative hybrids (for instance: live objects, with agency, amidst rigid functional frames), deepens the logocentric gaze but does not aim to forge non-hierarchical relationships. And fourthly, relinquishing control over certain issues means precisely that: certain issues and under certain circumstances. This characteristic has been more commonly achieved through the selective repatriation of biological and cultural remains. Thus, a “reformed” archaeology is happy to share what it cherishes most with previously marginalized parties: disciplinary epistemic coherence. All in all, however, archaeology keeps spreading the fruits of Enlightenment and gets other (local) actors to participate in institutional spaces created to control the definition and management of disciplinary principles.

In line with multiculturalism (with its promotion of diversity alongside its condemnation of difference; with its promotion of political correctness); in line with what Moshenska (2008:160) called “neo-liberal self-congratulation,” ethical preoccupations flourish in the discipline. A powerful, new multicultural ethics emanates from metropolitan centers, only to be adopted elsewhere. Although such an adoption is selective to suit local needs, a global ethical canon has been in place for quite a number of years. In this regard, two issues have not received due attention: (a) how that canon has been responded at local levels; and (b) how it articulates with the cultural logic of late capitalism, with development, and with the market. An answer to the former question must account for the fact that the discipline (along with its ethical principles) has not just been adopted widely (even by former contradictors) but has also been contested by grass-roots organizations, social movements, and academic militants. An answer to the latter must account for a temporal coincidence: at the same time that ethical codes were enacted in archaeology, the discipline tuned up its philosophical gear to accommodate to multicultural changes and to the growing needs of capitalist expansions—which usually engulf the frontiers where ethnic Others still live. In short, an answer to both questions cannot elude to record that a multicultural ethics does not destabilizes but strengthens archaeological tenets by providing the moral means by which they can accommodate to contextual transformations while remaining basically unchanged. In this accommodation the relationship with Otherness is salient. The contextual concerns of archaeological ethics aim to bring Others to share the benefits of the discipline while striving to banish confrontational dichotomies—such as indigenous peoples vs. archaeologists. Good intentions notwithstanding, banishing those dichotomies mostly serves to unify and solidify archaeology by making it more democratic.<sup>1</sup>

Accepting archaeology as is, especially through its promotion of a multicultural ethics, amounts to veiling conflicting views about history, the past, the ancestors, knowing. In a conspiring mood I could say that veiling differences and making discrepancies invisible has been a fulfilled aim of ethical principles; but given that so many good intentions are at stake, I could say that they were unintended consequences which, in the long run, only served disciplinary concerns—and thus, the modern cosmology. Indeed, archaeological ethics is modern and the promise of inclusion it delivers is also modern. The problem is that such an inclusion is violent and logocentric; further, it coexists with the utmost complicity with development and the market. These issues, and others, are addressed by the papers in this book.

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<sup>1</sup>Contemporary democracy seeks to protect the rights of the minorities lest they are devoured by those of the majorities; yet, such a protection is mostly fulfilled by granting the disenfranchised access to dominant worldviews but rarely by protecting and respecting differences (ontological and otherwise). As Mario Blaser (2009:883) noted: “In the context of the encounters between diverse social formations and Euro-modernity, which is the historical milieu from which most contemporary claims of modernity arise, ‘modernity’ implied, first and foremost, a language of exclusion and, only then, a promise of inclusion—of course, always demanding that non-moderns reform themselves to be modern.”

## About the Arguments Set Forth in This Volume

The book is divided in two complementary sections, one devoted to address the first question posed above (how the global ethical canon has been received and responded locally) and the second to address the second question (how such a canon articulates with the postmodern, development, and the market). The first section (*Is there a global archaeological ethics? Canonical conditions for discursive legitimacy and local responses*) includes six papers, whose authors were asked to consider how a global (multicultural) ethical discourse affects their specific praxis, as seen from their situated, local perspectives. The results are disparate and show how their authors position themselves in the academic and militant arenas. The paper by Joe Watkins is truly emblematic in this regard. Ten years ago he wrote a paper for a volume on ethics (Watkins 2003), in which he reflected on the effects, that he deemed mostly positive, the new ethical principles could have on the relationship between archaeologists and Indigenous peoples. His tone was optimistic—in spite on some doubts regarding polarization and widening gulfs in some areas. Watkins (2003:132) even labeled some codes of ethics as “praiseworthy,” specifically the SAA Code of Ethics and WAC’s Vermillion Accord. In less than a decade that optimism has vanished:

This is where North American archaeology falls short. Praxis—putting theoretical knowledge to work—should be part of the active cycle in the development of ethics in North American archaeology, but it has not been so. Perhaps there hasn’t been an active movement to exclude Indigenous or “minority” populations from an active involvement with archaeology, but there has also not been an active welcoming of archaeology to those populations other than on individual cases until recently... the ability to change the ethical structures of North American practitioners seems unlikely (Chap. 2).

What has happened in the intervening years? Even a rapid glance will show reification and disciplinary hardening as the two main events that have occurred, one acting upon ethics and the other as its more profound consequence. And then we come to extant power structures, to privileges whose holders are not willing to relinquish:

In the Principles, “interested publics” are considered to have relatively equal interest in the archaeological record, but in reality that interest does not equate to power, control, or ownership. It is highly unlikely that the members of the Society for American Archaeology who are currently privileged in the process will freely turn over control to non-academic communities, regardless of the intentions of those communities (Chap. 2).

Rafael Curtoni expresses similar concerns, especially as the current ethics arises from a conception of archaeology which is modern and thus disembodied, detached and instrumental. An ethics arising from a modern discipline could not be but modern—bringing along epistemic violence, distance and a fearful relationship with politics. Curtoni is specially critic of multivocality, with its neutralization of difference and its disdain of power structures. It is not surprising that both come from the geopolitical south, Watkins as a member of a subaltern minority in the USA and Curtoni as a citizen of country occupying a subaltern position vis-à-vis

the metropolitan centers. Their subaltern perspectives, from which they fustigate current archaeological ethics, contrast with the positions of the other four contributors to this section—two from the Anglo world (Ferris/Welch and Phillips/Ross) and two from southern and eastern Europe (Fernández and Marciniak)—for whom ethics has pitfalls but is also promising. While Caroline Phillips and Annie Ross acknowledge ethics-related improvements in the relationship between archaeology and indigenous peoples in Australia and New Zealand (incorporation of indigenous knowledge into legislation, participation in community-based research and in decision-making) they also think that

...there is still a considerable distance for archaeological practice to travel to overcome the barriers of the imposed rationale for investigation, the underlying understandings of the past, and interpretations of the results of archaeological research, that remain almost solely with the archaeologists and administrators of heritage management in both countries (Chap. 3).

Ethical concerns in Central-Eastern Europe, a Arek Marciniak shows, are basically limited to disciplinary issues, especially as archaeology entered an unprecedented expansion in the contract arena in the current post-communist epoch; such concerns translate into ethical codes and regulations. Indeed, ethics is mostly geared to ensure the academic quality of contract-related archaeological products, as well as fostering what archaeologists consider an important duty, that is, targeting “illegal” practices (especially trade and looting of archaeological materials). Yet, unlike most preoccupations with contract or applied archaeology (generally expressed in terms of poor academic standards), Neal Ferris and John Welch think that it is a privileged field in which to put to test the concerns an ethics-led activist practice has positioned in the last two decades (multivocality, collaboration, commitment, authority decentring, and the like), especially as applied archaeologists vastly outnumber academic practitioners:

The accumulated consequence of this trend, occurring across North America continually in applied contexts, is a re-alignment of archaeological ethics from being about advancing archaeological values and harvesting the material record before development impact, to being about servicing broad societal values that get variably asserted for the material past when encountered in the intersection of economic growth, capitalist endeavour, and community interest (Chap. 7).

Lastly, Víctor Fernández, writing from Spain but reflecting on what is going on in Western Europe ethics-wise, also shows that disciplinary preoccupations have taken the stage, not unlike the events accruing worldwide. Yet, he moves beyond describing what is currently happening to speak from a different morality, one that is still inexistent or fairly marginal. His call for taking seriously different publics and worldviews (not just those identified as “European” in mainstream parlance) articulates with his critique of modern archaeology:

It is not an issue of undemanding tolerance from a superiority stand but of true equal rights to all parts, being well aware that the real danger to archaeology and heritage does not come today from different cultures and conceptions but from the same core of our western rationality, represented by the capitalist system.

These six different perspectives, situated as they are, see the glass half full or half empty regarding ethics. Mostly, they underscore that positioning and situatedness are key for understanding ethics through praxis; otherwise, reification will linger on unabatedly.

The second section (*Archaeological ethics in the global arena: emergences, transformations and accommodations*) includes eight papers also dealing with ethics and praxis. Yet, instead of writing from the places from which they work and write, the authors were asked to write from the specific topics in which they research and militate. The first paper, by Alejandro Haber, sets the tone of the section by addressing what it means to be an archaeologist doing archaeology (a modern discipline) within a modern matrix (the cultural logic of capitalism). The word *ethics* is almost absent from his paper, underscoring that the morality of archaeologists does not have to be mentioned in order to make it evident. It is just out there, waiting to be engaged. Once that occurs, archaeological ethics easily renders that it has been forged in the entanglement with modernity and capitalism. Development, Alejandro shows, is the master trope guiding the relationship, especially as its *absent plenitude* (taken as a natural given supported by universal laws) even dictates disciplinary agendas—such as the provision of epistemic arguments to suit its demands. Prominent in this regard is the role of contract archaeology, explored by Jaime Almansa and Nicolas Zorzin. Contract archaeology is not a minor thing: (a) it employs more than 90 % of acting archaeologists worldwide; (b) it has promoted profound curricular transformations (something achieved by no other event in the history of the discipline, not even by the advent of the scientific program in the 1960s)<sup>2</sup>; (c) it has abated the critical stance of archaeology towards the global order by an uncritical functionality with capitalism, agreeing with development projects that are negatively impacting human populations as well as the rights of nature; in doing so, it has led the discipline to an uncritical, unreflecting *cul-de-sac*, where social and political responsibilities are rare, to say the least; and (d) it has diminished the possibility for the discipline to rebuild its metaphysical and ontological apparatus, already clearly hierarchical and neocolonial. In contract archaeology the relationship of the discipline with development appears as an innocent instrumentality, as a mere technical service.

If we are to define what a multicultural ethics in archaeology looks like, no better place to look at that so-called public archaeology. In this point, McDavid and Brock (Chap. 11) are outright correct: “Over the course of the past century, public archaeology (however defined) and archaeological ethics have been mutually constituted.” Public archaeology is the arena where archaeological ethics have been more clearly deployed. For them, “four of the most prominent approaches used in contemporary public archaeology practice” define what an ethical archaeology practice is today in contextual terms: activism, multivocality, collaboration, and community engagement. But as ethics, public archaeology is context-dependent and can have many readings.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>New undergraduate programs—characterized by their short length (normally no more than 3 years) and their technical emphasis—are being created to mass-produce archaeologists to fulfill the contractual needs arising from capitalist expansions (transport infrastructure and mining are the most salient).

<sup>3</sup>See Green et al. (2003) for a different conception of public archaeology.

Archaeologists attach a great value to publishing, not only because it is the ace in career building but because ethical principles link a responsible relationship with the record to timely and accessible publications, as discussed by Mitch Allen. Yet, if this disciplinary value were considered in relation to contextual values, the possibility of archaeological research and practice not mediated by publication emerges. Publication may be *a must* for academic archaeology but that is not the case for other kinds of practice, especially those challenging the discipline's modernity. The urge of other archaeologies is not publication, which may or may not happen as a research result. But even if it happens, the material published (a booklet, for instance) bears no specific names, invisible behind the anonymous face of the collectivity.

Michael Di Giovine's discussion of ethics and heritage brings to the fore an important issue, usually overlooked: ethical concerns function in contested fields ("a clash of moralities") in which power and hegemonies are at stake, no matter how disguise they are by a naturalized professional morality. Conflict is bypassed through reification, especially as it unfolds in the hegemony of modernity. He also points out that "multicultural ethics, while frequently well-intentioned, create or perpetuate the very tensions it seeks to resolve." For that reason he proposes a *patrimonial ethics* centered "on a more robust understanding of the totality" of stakeholders as well as in the heritage object itself through its historicity, "pregnant as it is with myriad meanings."

The paper by Lesley Green describes "a participatory research ethic" which calls into question the extended multicultural goal of getting different worldviews to coexist without really trying to understand and respect each other<sup>4</sup>; it also questions the self-designated knowledge privileges of archaeology and anthropology. Her on-the-ground ethics takes Palikur ontology seriously. Her ethics is not modern-modeled and thus not archaeology-enforcing (excavation, for instance, was not even considered in the research she describes; and artifacts were not taken as givens but as "emerging in relation to particular interests and narratives and technologies"). At last, she posits that "The challenge is to move beyond matching perspectives, theirs to ours, to an engagement with the real challenges that are the challenges of 'the real': the possibility of different empiricisms; different 'cogitos'."

Once enacted, ethical mandates seem to establish themselves as unquestioned and ahistorical truths. They may be refined, amended, but their historicity is hidden. It is so for most professional archaeologists—for whom ethical principles are destined, after all, and who can be held accountable for their infringement. For others, however, ethics is a day-to-day matter more than a set of abstractions and can have lasting effects on different archaeologies. For Eldon Yellowhorn an ethical archaeology is tantamount to an archaeology serving indigenous needs and expectations. He feels that "I am doing a service to my community by appropriating the methods I need to pursue internally defined objectives."

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<sup>4</sup>This is known in the West as *relativism*, widely performed in a power vacuum oblivious of ideologies and hegemonies.