PROCESSUAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Exploring Analytical Strategies,

Frames of Reference,

and Culture Process

Edited by

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PRAEGER

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Prelude: Searching for Home in the Modern Landscape of Archaeology

ROBERT L. KELLY

THE DAY I MET Lew Binford, in the fall of 1978, was wet and dreary. Although I hate being wet, I was enthusiastic because my first day of classes at the University of New Mexico included Binford's seminar on hunter-gatherers.

At that time the seminar room was accessible only via two outside doors, but being a neophyte, I knew of only one. Wanting to make a good impression, I arrived early but found the door locked. To get out of the rain, I waited around the corner under the building's porch, assuming that I would see other students arrive (and that one would have a key).

Other students did arrive, but they entered through a second door, which was apparently wide open. I've always been a slow learner, and so some 20 minutes into the class, I finally figured out my mistake and sneaked in. The room was packed, as it would be for the rest of the semester, and I had to sit behind Lew. For the next three hours I watched his head bob up and down and wag back and forth as he carried on about environment, climate, hunter-gatherers, technology, and theory.

It should have been boring, but it was quite the opposite. I had been trained quite well, I think, as a field archaeologist. Lew's approach to archaeology was different. Through it, I learned to be concerned with theory, with understanding how I know that I know something. I gained a deeper appreciation of the importance of ethnographic data to archaeology.

Lew frequently told us that he "didn't know how to teach us how to have good ideas." I thought a lot about that, and still do as I try to help my

students have good ideas. I have learned that the rest of anthropology is essential to the archaeological enterprise. My doctoral research in the western Great Basin entailed linguistics, ethnography, and biological anthropology (along with geology and the other natural sciences); we also dealt with the local tribes, quite successfully I thought, with the difficult issues of the analysis of human skeletal remains. Binford taught me the importance of science. He also taught me the importance of understanding research paradigms. In so doing, and perhaps without intending it, he taught me the importance of listening to other ideas, of trying to look at the world differently.

The morning air was still the last time that Leonard Yellowman saw Cliff Gateson alive. Sitting to one side of the rockshelter, hunched over the computer on his lap, the only sounds Len heard were occasional pings of trowels hitting stones. The excavation was winding down, there wasn't much data to input, and so Len was alone with his thoughts.

Raised on the Navajo reservation but educated in two well-regarded institutions, he had always felt that he was straddling two worlds. He had learned to handle this—both the teasing on the reservation over his now English-accented Navajo, and silly questions off the res as to whether he could do a rain dance. For him, archaeology had become essential in his adolescent years as a way to understand who he was; and now, it was important to understanding the place of the Navajo in the world's history. "It's my cosmology," he would tease his classmates. "Binford and Schiffer are the Twin Heroes."

But he did not feel so playful this last year in graduate school. Like all cosmologies, Len felt that his contained many contradictions, and he felt pulled in many directions. All sorts of paradigms, approaches, and demands seemed equally reasonable. Science is all that matters, one professor said. Nonsense, said the postmodernists, science is just an imperialist imposition of masculine, European, upper-class values, another way to colonize and dominate. A pox on both, cried others; develop a public archaeology program, unite amateurs and professionals. Preserve our cultural resources.

At conferences, Len had listened attentively to feminist papers, postmodernist approaches, symbolic interpretations of rock art, and the use of oral history in reconstructing the past. Even after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, he had paid attention to Marxist interpretations. He had listened to debates between academic and CRM archaeologists, and participated in discussions of whether science or pragmatics should determine if lithic scatters were eligible for the National Register. And he had listened to his grandmother, to her stories about the past.

Eventually he felt as though he were stuck in one of the dust devils that passed over the sand hills near Shiprock, New Mexico. Every view seemed to have its point, all made sense sometimes, and yet no sense at other times. Accepting that a person can't do everything, Len felt that he had to choose.

But which? Asking himself that question as he was preparing his dissertation prospectus, he felt he had reached a decision and had called his undergraduate mentor, Gateson. "Just sit tight for awhile," Gateson had said. "Let me come visit with you."

Yellowman's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a truck grinding up the wash in four-wheel drive. The truck stopped just down the hill from the rockshelter, and Gateson slowly stepped out. He was always thin, but today he seemed especially so. He pulled a cane from the back of the pickup and slowly picked his way through the sagebrush. Gateson was old and life had taken its toll on him. One eye was covered by a black patch, he limped from a hip injury, and his hands were gnarled with arthritis. His pockets rattled from the pill bottles he carried. He sat in the front row at conferences, but often fell asleep. He lost his train of thought now and then, but he had never lost his sense of humor: at parties his eye patch often sported a skull and crossbones, and his favorite explanation was that he had lost the eye during a trowel-flipping contest that had gotten out of hand. Barely legible on his worn-out T-shirt was the image of a trowel and dustpan, and the words DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO SCIENCE.

Gateson had seen and done just about everything an archaeologist could see or do. He had excavated at Kaminaljuyú, at Karnac in Egypt, Les Eyzies in France, and Danger Cave in Utah. Rumor had it that he had been taken as a baby to visit Llewellyn Loud at Nevada's Lovelock Cave in 1912. He'd done some of the first systematic surface surveys, developed quantitative projectile point typologies, done ethnoarchaeology before it had a name, and was one of the first to incorporate oral history into research. His classes were filled with personal reminiscences: sitting alone in King Tut's tomb, exploring shell middens in Tierra del Fuego, and crawling by kerosene lantern through the temple at Peru's Chavín de Huantár.

"Hello, Yellowman," he said. His normally full voice was hoarse and weak.

"Hi, Cliff," Len answered, "Watch out for that solar panel."

Gateson looked around at the site's equipment and ran a hand through his thinning white hair. "Enough electronics here to make the CIA happy. Damnation, I remember when brown paper bags were the latest in field technology."

"Yes, sir," Len smiled. The "I remember when" game was one of Gateson's favorites.

Len gave Gateson the traditional tour around the site, showing him some of the finds, and a printout of debitage densities compared to digital photos overlaid onto a GIS-based stratigraphy. Len suggested it indicated that periods of apparent maximum use correlated with periods of surface stabilization, and that peaks in use were more likely a product of changes in rates of sedimentation. He took special care to point out the layer of ash that Len was fairly sure was Mazama. "Look for them fluties," Gateson said cheerfully.

They stood watching the excavators for a while before Gateson spoke up. "Did I come here so you could show me a layer of ash and some fancy digital whatchamacallit?"

"No, sir." Len answered, "Let's sit over here." They walked a short distance away to the table that served as an office, Len letting Gateson set the pace.

When they were seated, Gateson laid his cane across his knees and said, "So, you've passed your qualifying exams with flying colors, you've spent a pants load of money on your B.A. and M.A., you've been granted an NSF fellowship for your doctoral program . . . and now you want to quit." He said the final word as though it tasted bad.

"I'm an old man, Len," he continued. "I'm older than dirt. I've outlived my closest colleagues. I've outlived my wife. I've even . . . outlived my two children." He paused a moment, his remaining green eye looking out on the piñon trees across the canyon.

He turned his head back with a jerk. "I'm old, but archaeology is what has kept me young. It's what kept me asking questions, searching for better answers. I don't know that I've actually come to any conclusions, but I've learned a lot in trying. And so it's hard for me to understand why anyone exposed to the 'mystery of prehistory' could even think about doing anything else."

"It's not so much that I want to do something else," Len answered. "In fact, I don't know what I would do instead. Go to law school, I suppose."

Gateson's head dropped into his hands. "Oh God, not that."

"Okay, not that. It's just that I need to know that I'm doing something useful. But I'm not sure which way of doing archaeology is going to get me there. Part of me wants to be a humanist, to reconcile what my culture says about the past with other views of prehistory, to introduce other voices to a dialogue about the past. But part of me also says that talk is cheap. And that part wants to be a scientist, to find out facts, things that are true. And I mean *really* true. But at the same time it seems that any effort to find out something true is thwarted by what the postmodernists say: There are no facts, only interpretations." Len added glumly, "I think that's Nietzsche."

"Show-off." Gateson smiled.

Len looked sheepish for a moment. "But it's true. Interpretations do seem to be intertwined with who we are. Maybe what I say comes from being Navajo. It gets privileged at the moment because it's politically correct right now to admit other voices to archaeology. But that's not what I want. I want my ideas taken seriously because they might be right. That means they have to come up to some standard other than my background . . . just as your ideas have to come up to some standard other than that you're a white male."

"At least you didn't say dead white male," Gateson replied. He tried to continue, but Yellowman clearly was not done with his catharsis.

"And what factors do I privilege? Material conditions like environment, subsistence, and population density? Or should I look to more social factors? Tension between men and women? Between classes? Do I spend my time reconstructing group size, or whether men or women made tools, or hunted, or took care of the kids? Do I reconstruct tool function, or are the symbolic meanings of things the really critical element; are they what 'move' society and produce change?"

Len paused a moment, but Gateson now knew better than to interrupt. He simply nodded and waited.

"And is it more important to study the big, evolutionary questions, the origins of agriculture or social hierarchy? These are interesting questions, but they treat humans simply as nodes in a system. So is it better to treat human history as a story, one that makes humans real actors and agents of change? Is archaeology best when it focuses on a particular history, of the Navajo, for example, or when it searches for general laws that apply to all places at all times?

"And should I be an academic, teaching hordes of college students, most of whom I suspect don't give a damn about prehistory? I'd get to spend what time was available for research on things that were interesting to me, though the public might regard me as spending my time writing 'itty-bitty papers for itty-bitty journals' as a friend of mine in Kentucky tells me the governor there once said.

"Or should I go into CRM, where I'd spend my time protecting the archaeological record and get to do far more field research than any academic archaeologist sees nowadays, but where I'd be limited to studying whatever lay in the way of the well pad or fiber-optic cable? And where I'd have to spend so much time on legal minutiae that I'd have no time to really think about things. Barely enough time to get the report in on schedule."

"No one said life would be easy," Gateson replied quietly.

"I don't ask that it be easy," Yellowman replied. "I just ask that my career be meaningful. If I figured that I could do *everything* well, then I would do that. But I figure I have to choose if I want to do any *one* thing well."

Gateson and Yellowman sat still for a long while. The breeze caught the smell of sagebrush and wound it around the two men. Gateson took a deep breath and spoke.

"When I was young, there weren't so many ways to do archaeology. Some would say," Gateson chuckled, "that it was simply a sample-size problem. And they'd be right. In 1935, all the archaeologists in the country could fit into my office. There were dang few archaeologists and dang few ways to do archaeology.

"But now there are more archaeologists than Carter's has pills, and a million different ways to do archaeology. Some folks say that we should let a thousand flowers bloom, the more 'voices' there are, the merrier we'll all

be. Yet it seems to me that it's those same people who refuse to admit some voices. Science, for example, has become a villain in some people's minds. But I think this is wrong, and it's wrong mostly because some folks don't know what science is. Some folks think that science is about numbers and lab coats, that science assumes linear causality, and a materialist basis for human behavior. But those folks are wrong."

He paused for awhile. "Now I'll admit that science has carried a lot of European-culture-inspired, materialist baggage with it, but we shouldn't condemn science for that. Because science is really about nothing more than honesty. It's about saying, 'Here's my idea, and here's the data that will refute it, and here's my attempt to collect the data that will prove my idea wrong.' That's where most folks who call themselves scientists go wrong. They set out to collect the data that proves their idea right, but they ought to be looking for what will prove it wrong. And they should know better because anyone who calls themselves a scientist should know that we can never prove an idea right, we can only prove it wrong. So there's no reason that a scientific approach can't be used for any idea—materialist or otherwise. Because it's simply about taking an explicit and an honest approach to testing ideas. It doesn't matter where the ideas come from."

"So why don't those who claim to be scientists do this?" Yellowman asked.

Gateson smiled wryly. "Science is part of society. We can't escape that. It's hard to say that the idea you've invested the last 15 years of your life into is wrong. You don't get inducted into the National Academy of Sciences for being wrong. You get in for being right."

Yellowman pulled his long black hair back. "So, the postmodernists are right. Science is grounded in a fundamentally European worldview."

"That's right." Gateson waited for that frank admission to settle in. "Science is historically linked with Western culture, but I don't think it's irrevocably so. And quite frankly, if all cultures have valuable ways of looking at the world, then doesn't that mean the Western world, too? Anthropology has a hard time with this. Look at Stanford. Heck, those folks couldn't reconcile two different ways of looking at the world, so they split the department. What a mess! If anthropologists—whose central message is the importance of looking at the world in different ways—can't reconcile different ways of looking at the world, then what message are they sending to students? I guess it just goes to show that it's a really difficult thing to do.

"And personally," Gateson leaned forward and poked a gnarled finger at Yellowman, "I think that you are in a better position to do it. Most white people—and, let's face it, archaeology is still dominated by white people—most white people live their lives in one culture. They don't know what it's like to have to reconcile two different ways of looking at the world. But folks like Native Americans and African-Americans, well . . . they know what it's like. They have to reconcile two different cultures in their

everyday lives. If I could live my life as an academic over again, I'd do everything I could to get my students overseas for a while, so that they could really experience what it's like to live within another culture and to see the world differently. That would make them better archaeologists.

"Postmodernism did us a favor by pointing out that culture has an impact on how we understand the world. And that it can lead us astray. But for all their talk of nuance and texture, I think the damn PoMos just gave up on the complexity of human culture. And by throwing out science, it discarded the one way we have for evaluating ideas. Without that, all we can rely upon are political correctness litmus tests. Or we can just ponder not the past, but the ways that we think about the past."

"That's right," Yellowman said with his first sign of enthusiasm. "In postmodernism, the subject becomes us, not other people, and I always thought anthropology was about people other than myself. Sometimes it seems to me as though white anthropologists are saying that the only really interesting people are white people! Sure, postmodernists are the first to flagellate their own culture and its past wrongs, but still... it's themselves they find interesting. My God, it gets boring."

"And for that reason alone, it'll probably disappear," Gateson replied, nodding his head. He paused a long while, leaning on his cane now. "You know, maybe it's just because it's what I learned early in my career, or maybe it's just because I like that feeling of an ol' time religion, or maybe it's just because I'm a nearly dead white male, but I think that processual archaeology had something going for it. Its materialist bias, which ended up privileging things like subsistence and the environment, I think captured the variables that were important to the scale of phenomena that archaeology, and especially the archaeology of ancient hunter-gatherers, records." He waved his cane toward the rockshelter excavation. "It's not that other variables aren't important, but that their effects are not visible in a systematically observable fashion.

"But at the same time, other factors have an effect, and sometimes a long-lasting effect. Look at the effects of Christianity or Islam on the world of the last 2,000 years. Ten thousand years from now you won't be able to understand the late Holocene world without knowing something about Christianity or Islam—or Buddhism or Hinduism for that matter. And I doubt that religion is a factor only in the last 2,000 years."

Yellowman had begun gently tapping his trowel on his knee. "Or the Twin Heroes," he said quietly.

"Or the Twin Heroes." Gateson nodded. "We *do* live in a symbolic world, a world that culture creates for us. A world in which some animals may be taboo as food because of what they did in the Dreamtime. Of course, scientific analyses, like this optimal foraging theory I've been reading about, provide a way to compare economic expectations to the material record and help us find out why some foods were eaten and others were ignored.

"Now I do think that science sometimes goes too far and tries to distance itself from things that seem too mushy or touchy-feely. Humans do operate according to some materialist principles because they have to operate in a material world, but they're more than this. Any scientific project misleads itself if it ignores historical and cultural context."

"So," Yellowman interrupted, "people's oral traditions should be given equal weight, the same importance as ideas derived from scientific archaeology."

"True," Gateson said, "but there's a price to be paid for being admitted to the club. Science can evaluate claims only about the material world. It's got nothing to say about the immaterial world. So if oral tradition makes a claim about the material world, then we can scrutinize it. If oral tradition says that Indians have been in the New World forever, well, that's a claim that can be tested.

"And what if it doesn't stand up? Does that mean the oral history is wrong? Personally, I don't think so. One of my professors at Michigan used to say that everything is true, but we have to figure out what it is true *of*. Science is about things that are rooted in time and space. But oral history is mostly, and most important, about things that are timeless and spaceless. It's about things that are more important than a mere progression of historical events. The oral history may have the events wrong, but it nonetheless might have some other truths to it."

There was a long silence. "Is this any help to you?" Gateson finally asked.

"No." said Yellowman. "You've pretty much confirmed what I already knew. Archaeology has to be everything or nothing."

Gateson shook his head, leaned on his cane, and stood up. "Phil and Gordon would have liked that." He turned and looked out over the canyon intently, as if memorizing the landscape's look, and feel and scent. "I'll miss this," he whispered.

He turned back to Yellowman. "But now I've got to be moving on. I'm leaving for my place in Santa Fe in a few days, and there some loose ends to tie up back at the university."

Yellowman walked beside Gateson through the sagebrush, afraid that the old man would trip. When they reached the pickup, Gateson threw his cane into its bed, opened the door, and sat down slowly.

"I hope you won't leave the field, Len. It needs you. It needs people like you. I say that partly because the field will benefit from having different 'voices'—like an Indian voice—but also because, if you don't mind my getting maudlin on you, you care. A lot of people don't. That whippersnapper Kent Flannery once said that archaeology is the most fun you can have with your pants on. And I know some people who could tell us that archaeology is a lot of fun with your pants off." Gateson chuckled and started a story. "I remember when..."

But he saw the expression on Yellowman's face. "Well, another time maybe ... The point is that archaeology is fun, and that's good, but that's not why we do it."

Gateson sat looking out the windshield a long time. A dust devil whirled up the road, and Yellowman closed his eyes and coughed. When he opened them, Gateson was sitting unaffected by the remaining swirls of dust.

"I'm dying, Len. Cancer. Got eight to twelve months left."

Yellowman had guessed this and had tried to prepare himself, but still he was quiet for a long while. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. It was all he could think of to say.

Gateson dismissed Yellowman's comment with a wave of his hand. "Oh, don't be sorry. I'm old. I've had a good life. I've seen incredible things, and I'm lucky to know the hour of my death, because impending death is our best chance—hell, it's our last chance—to think about what's important. At times I've wondered if devoting my life to archaeology was worth it, but I always think it has been. Prehistory is important. It's *the* history for most of the world's peoples. And how we got to where we are today is important to understanding the relationships between people today. And that's what you can't forget.

"Archaeology isn't just about the dead, it's also about the living, about relationships between people. It doesn't matter if you're a processual archaeologist or a postmodernist. It doesn't matter if you think subsistence or symbols is what drives cultural change. It doesn't matter if you think oral tradition, or women, or men are important. And if you become an academic, don't forget that the world doesn't turn on some theoretical minutiae. If you go into CRM, remember the big questions; don't become parochial and concerned only about the local projectile point typology."

Gateson paused. He picked at a crack in the steering wheel and seemed to be looking for something on the floor of the truck.

"Len, find a problem that matters, and I mean matters in a big sense. What do we need to know about the past that will build bridges between people? What's going to help us understand humanity? Once you know that, then you let your knowledge of the diversity of archaeology guide you in deciding how to proceed—as a processualist, as a feminist, as an Indian, as a scientist. Whatever. Paradigms are tools, not religions.

"And most of all," Gateson smiled and put on his formal, lecture voice, "no matter how insignificant what you do may seem, I tell you it is most important that you do it." He gave Yellowman a sideways glance. "That's Gandhi."

"Touché," Yellowman said, a trace of a smile on his lips.

"It's not that Gandhi thought insignificant things were important. He certainly didn't. But he saw that small things, done for the right purpose and in the right spirit, would eventually add up to stunning effect."

Gateson took a deep breath. "God, I love the smell of sagebrush." Then he started the truck.

"Hate to just leave you like this, but what other way is there?" He ground the shifter into reverse. Yellowman quickly stuck his hand in the window and took Gateson's. "Thanks, sir," was all he said.

"You'll do fine." Gateson smiled.

Yellowman wiped his eyes and watched as the truck disappeared in the dust. Soon the air was still, broken only by the sound of trowels scraping across rocks.

"Well," Yellowman said to the sagebrush as he turned to walk back up the hill, "there's work to be done."

An earlier version of this essay was originally presented at the 2002 Great Basin Anthropological Conference in Ogden, Utah. I thank Steve Simms for inviting me to "do something different" for the plenary session.

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