Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

JENNA HENDRICK

BA (Binghamton University, State University of New York, 2016)

“Welcome Back to Caveman Times: Social Consequences of (Mis) Representations of the Paleolithic”

Department of Anthropology

Thursday, April 22, 2021
10:30 A.M.
Remote Defence

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. April Nowell, Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Brian Thom, Department of Anthropology, UVic (Co-Supervisor)

External Examiner:
Dr. Briana L. Pobiner, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Ingrid Handlovsky, School of Nursing, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Among the American population, there is a general misunderstanding of human evolution and human life in the Paleolithic. Beyond the mechanics of biological evolution, there is confusion over what sorts of modern-day behaviors are vestiges from humans’ evolutionary past. My master’s thesis explores what kind of misconceptions about Paleo-life and human evolution circulate in popular discourse and where these misconceptions stem from. Drawing on the experiences of community members in upstate New York, I conducted a multimodal discourse analysis via surveys, interviews, and a reflexive media analysis to triangulate my findings. Through these two discourses – that of the everyday understanding of human evolution and Paleo-life versus what kinds of messages popular media portrays on these same issues – I determined that popular media constitutes a large resource of information gathering for the general public. Furthermore, the media highlighted by my research participants to exhibit themes of human evolution had clear messages on race, gender, and violence that research participants largely believe to be successful modes of “survival of the fittest” and thus cultural “survivals” from when we were evolving to our modern form. Participant and media messages regarding race, gender, and violence mirror the logics behind white American Exceptionalism; though these everyday epistemologies are argued by my participants to be biological in nature, they merely reflect today’s values and are logics used to successfully participate in American society. That is to say, the repetitive, naturalizing messages portrayed by popular media on human evolution and paleo-life both construct and reify the popular understanding that modern concepts of race, gender and violence are biological and have led to the success of our species. With these findings, I offer science educators recommendations on how to best utilize edutainment to correct these outdated narratives.