

ANTH 150: Explorations in Anthropology: PseudoArchaeology

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. Quentin Mackie

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

From Alien involvement at Stonehenge or the Nazca Lines, to tales of the "Lost Continents" of Atlantis and Lemuria, to the invented prehistory of the Nazi's regime, archaeologists must grapple with many counter-narratives of historical events and archaeological finds that are not based on scientific inquiry or scholarly methods. Collectively, these amount to a parallel body of faux histories which can be called Pseudo-Archaeology: the appropriation of archaeological findings to support fringe theories of creationism, alien contact, racial superiority, and similar discredited ideas. For example, there is a long history of interpreting the ancient mound-building archaeological cultures of the North American Midwest as being a sign of North European exploration and settlement of North America in deep time. While there is no evidence for this, the very existence of this narrative speaks to a cultural appetite for revisionist, racist history and the politics of erasure of Indigenous history in cultural contexts dominated by the "Vanishing Indian" paradigm. Indeed, archaeologists must grapple with the implications of William Faulkner's enigmatic comment that, "The past is never dead. It is not even past."

This course will therefore examine a series of case studies of Pseudo-Archaeology in order to not only challenge such counter-narratives, but to understand the cultural and historical roots which may encourage them, and explore why there is a large public appetite for these alternative accounts of the past.

Skills Development

The course material will encourage critical thinking about the discipline of archaeology and what constitutes evidence-based interpretation of the past. Through exercises and assignments, some of which will be group-based, students will analyse and present case studies which exemplify the social context of knowledge, and the origins of alternative narratives of the past. In this way, students will learn about archaeology as an empirical discipline which has elements of a scientific approach, and also about archaeology as a way of knowing the past which is situated in the present day, and which can invite contentious disagreement from different quarters of society.