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# Being and Becoming Stone: Material Semiotics in Indian Religion and Spirituality

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**Abstract:** This essay employs Peircean semiotics to interpret shifts in Indian religion and spirituality in northeastern North America from the seventeenth century onwards. Patterns of material culture attest to a complex knotting of Algonquian spiritual practices and European-introduced Christianity during this period. At the center of this study are a series of contested stone features that relate both to shifting forms of spirituality in Indian country along with new agricultural practices at the time, typically associated with white farms. These two distinct histories of practice resulted in a ubiquitous set of stone features in the landscapes of New England. Archaeologists often see these diverse features as icons of the same object, while ethnohistoric records, oral histories, and contemporary indigenous and local interpretations point to the ambiguity of these features. A Peircean approach offers important insights on these contested features, both in the past and the present, demonstrating how meaning varies according to the community of human interpreters and how it shifts in a fluid and context-driven manner.

**Keywords:** Peircean semiotics; Native North America; archaeological theory; religion; spirituality; heritage; stone; colonialism

## Interpreting Resistances and Relations: An Introduction

I begin with a mundane example of material semiotics often associated with an activity that resonates deeply with the archaeological community, but with which everyone has

some level of experience: digging in the dirt. As I introduce a new group of students to field archaeology each summer in the woodlands of New England it typically only takes a few moments for the following situation to unfold. Nearly without fail, as an eager field student enthusiastically drives their shovel—despite my instructions otherwise, with great force—into the earth for the first time, they encounter a resistance, sometimes painful, that all New Englanders have experienced: that of a sizeable stone hidden under the shallow forest detritus. This is what Peirce might have referred to as a *Second*, a new relation or reaction between a potential interpretant and a sign (Peirce Edition Project 1998b and c). As he described, secondness is a, "two-sided consciousness of effort and resistance, which seems to come tolerably near to a pure sense of actuality…*a mode of being of one thing which consists in how a second object is*" (Peirce 1995:76, my emphasis). The resulting *Third* is one of several explanations that fall within a very interesting range for my particular field project, discussed further at the end of this paper. For now it is sufficient to note that nearly all archaeologists would explain the stone and its presence as having something to do with geological conditions or site formation processes. This explanation is what Peirce referred to as the logical interpretant (Peirce Edition Project 1998a). In Peircean semiotics, all signs are triadic, composed of sign, object, and interpretant. The interpretant allows movement in the system. It is what connects the sign (signifier) to its object (signified), but it also becomes or begets a new sign in and of itself. As with many Peircean conventions, there are three types of interpretant: emotional, energetic, and logical, or conventional (Peirce Edition Project 1998a: xxxv-xxxvi). The field archaeologist thus knows these things about geological conditions from what Peirce called habit or convention. As Alexander Bauer (2013:16) recently noted, Peirce used *habit* to refer to "the repetition and patterning of socially construed meaning." He went on to explain that, meaning is not inherent in signs themselves, but rather in semiotic engagement of interpreters with the world (ibid 17; See also Peirce 1893; Singer 1984). On a related note, Lele (2006) pointed out that Peirce framed all matter as "hidebound habit." He explained, "Peirce recognized that the obdurate nature of matter made its consequences habitual and law-like, which could regulate subsequent semiosis under certain conditions" (Lele 2006:55; See also Preucel and Bauer 2001).

In this essay I focus on one particular set of law-like and habitual consequences that result (and have resulted) from dry laid stone features found throughout the woodlands of New England. In an earlier iteration of this paper, presented at the 2013 American Anthropological Association meetings, I focused on the ways in which these piles of stone have recently emerged at the center of some very powerful heritage struggles and debates between members of the archaeological community, the general public, and Native American groups (see Ives 2013). I pointed out, using Peirce's grand idea of synechism, how these conflicts challenged and improved interpretations of stone piles, namely in forcing archaeologists to understand that the iconicity they see from pile to pile is actually

false if they open up the community of interpretants to consist of more than just white archaeologists. In other words, just because these stone features are icons of the same object for most archaeologists, the interpretation changes and diversifies as we widen our engagement with other groups. Here I ask how these obdurate and stubborn piles of stone result in multiple and competing semiotic "consequences" in this wider community of interpretants. In this paper, I move away from contemporary struggles highlighted in my conference paper, instead to delve into how these stone features operated in colonial New England, particularly as they might pertain to the spread of Christianity in Native American communities from the 17th century onwards. As with all other papers in this collection, I argue that Peirce's writings on semiotics and pragmatism offer valuable insights on archaeological material culture.

## Being and Becoming Stone or Petrifying the Ancestors

In his mid-17th century writings on the Narragansett Indians of current-day Rhode Island, Roger Williams recorded a very different set of interpretations of—and relations with—stone compared to those mentioned above. He wrote, "they have it from their Fathers, that Kautantowwit [glossed as the "creator," See Cipolla 2013 a and b; Crosby 1983; Simmons 1970] made one man and woman of stone, which disliking, he broke into pieces and made another man and women of a Tree, which were the Foundations of all humankind" (Williams 2009[1643]:135). Just over 250 years later, anthropologist Frank Speck (Prince and Speck 1906) recorded the Mohegan-Pequot gloss for stone as *sun*, while *sunjum* meant sachem, or tribal leader. It is possible that the shared root words relate to the special place of tribal leaders, situated somewhere in between everyday people and ancestors of deep time. Adding further support for this tentative interpretation, most tribal groups of the Northeast currently refer to stones as either "grandmothers" or "grandfathers." It is these ethnohistoric and ethnographic observations that inform my interpretations of certain histories of stone piling in the area.

Stone heaps are ubiquitous in the woods of New England today, and both archaeological and ethnohistoric records confirm that this was the case from at least the 17th century to the present. In 1624, Edward Winslow wrote on these practices for the first time (Simmons 1986:251). He observed the Wampanoag of coastal Massachusetts constructing two types of features: what he called memory holes and stone and brush heaps, or memory piles. He was particularly interested in the former, noting that memory holes were typically dug close to a path, and that they captured or preserved memory by coaxing newcomers and passersby to inquire about them with local indigenous groups, who presumably dug the holes (effectively creating an "semiotic chain"; see Agha 2007:205). On the other hand, the heaps of stone and brush operated in a slightly different way; they acquired mass and meaning as people remembered. In other words, indigenous people added to these heaps each time they passed by. While brush was often burned away as part of forestry

management practices, the piles of stone remained and their relative size related to the social "size" and/or frequency of the associated memory. Regarding one particular heap in Massachusetts, Ezra Stiles (1916[1762]:160) noted that, "the Indians immemorially have been used, whenever & as often as they pass this large Stone, to cast a Stone or piece of Wood upon it." He also wrote (Stiles 1916[1762]:160),

> The Indians being asked the reason of their Custom & Practice, say they know nothing about it, only that their Fathers & their Grandfathers & their Great Grandfathers did so, and charged all their Children to do so; and yet if they did not cast a Stone or piece of Wood on that Stone as often as they passed by it, they would not prosper…

Based on these observations, I see the signs in question (i.e., stone heaps) as operating in several important ways amongst indigenous communities of the Northeast at the time. If stone is a type of ancestor in this case, but then the community of ancestors is fluid and dynamic (and composed of both humans and non-humans). The heaps in question could be piles of ancestors of a different and much deeper time. So, from a Peircean perspective we have a set of habits or conventions that lead to a regularity in semiotic consequences of these heaps, and of stone in general. Of note, there does not appear to be a direct (indexical) spatiaotemporal link between such piles and buried human ancestors, i.e., these piles are not grave markers (See Ives 2013). In my interpretation, this pattern relates to the process of easing the recently dead into the community of ancestors in deep time, a process of symbolic petrification. According to Roger Williams (2009[1643]) and others (Crosby 1983; Simmons 1970), one of the deceased's spirits, which resided in the head, travelled to Cautantowwit's house to the southwest shortly after death. To help facilitate this process, bodies were placed into graves with the tops of their heads pointing toward the southwest. Material culture also participated in this process. Though plain fieldstones were occasionally placed in the vicinity of the grave, above the ground, typically graves were not marked with any form of enduring material culture (Cipolla 2013a). On the contrary, the bereaved usually placed a garment belonging to the deceased either directly on the ground surface above the grave or hung it from a nearby tree (DeForest 1851). Once in place, it was forbidden to touch the garment, leaving it to waste away due to exposure, creating an icon of the ancestral human remains wasting away below the ground.[1] Roger Williams (2009[1643]), and later Morgan (1851) who observed the Iroquois, each recorded a related taboo: the living did not speak the name of the dead. Combined, the materiality of commemoration and these linguistic prohibitions helped to ease the recently dead into the community of faceless ancestors (Cipolla 2013a). Individual names, specific burial locations, and individuals with specific

genealogical ties were materially and linguistically forgotten. My recent work looks at the connection between these practices of forgetting and new commemoration practices that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. I seek to explore possible connections between stone heaping and remembering/forgetting the recently dead in such contexts.

This set of material relations is even more intriguing during the Great Awakening of the mid-18th century, a time when many indigenous people converted to Christianity. The archaeological community is quite adept at recognizing signs of Christian conversion in the material culture record. However, my research and my use of Peircean theory suggest that Christian conversion is much more than a simple process of replacement, a straightforward shift from paganism to Christianity, or mythical time to genealogical/historical time. Zoë Crossland (2013) made similar points using the Peircean semiotic to interpret 19th century missionary contexts in South Africa. Following Crossland, instead of reifying or creating dichotomies, I see the categories in question as continuities, which result in hybrid forms (e.g., Bhabha 1994). Archaeologists typically make several observations that point to Christian conversion: grave shafts reoriented from the southwest, pointing to the creator's house, to the east, in preparation for the second coming of Christ; grave shafts change form from oval (i.e., indexing bodies placed into the grave in the flexed or fetal position) to rectangular (i.e., indexing bodies placed in the ground in the supine position); and—most important for this paper—the purchase and use of professionally-made grave markers, bearing text inscriptions that almost always include the deceased's name (See Cipolla 2013a for an extended discussion of these patterns). All of these material patterns are well documented in association with Christian habits and conventions. However, we must still pay attention to the broader landscape and deeper traditions of remembering and forgetting among Algonquian groups in the area. Although I agree that the material transformation highlighted here did indeed take place on many Native American reservations in the Northeast at this time, I also see other evidence that challenges or at least complicates simplistic "black and white" narratives of replacement. I discuss these in terms of three main points.

The first thing to note is that Christian conversion did not signal the end of stone heaping in Indian country, though there were some important transformations in the practices during the 18th and 19th centuries (Ives 2013). Outsiders like Edwards Winslow, Ezra Stiles, and Frank Speck observed these practices from the 17th through 20th centuries and sometimes, in the case of Speck, participated in them. These records attest to the continuity of this practice into the present. In other words, Christian Indians possibly continued this practice despite their new religion. Also recorded implicitly was a consistent reluctance on indigenous peoples' parts to speak of these practices and explain them to outsiders. Likewise, these documents stand as evidence for an enduring white fascination with Indian stone heaping, which was sometimes appropriated in the

name of saving “prehistoric” Indian practices that white middle class enthusiasts saw as at risk of being lost (Butler 1946).

What these records do not usually comment on is a set of parallel practices of stone piling that began in the eighteenth century on farms in the area (Ives 2013). Stones encountered while plowing or digging, such as the one referred to in my introduction, were a common occurrence on farmlands of New England. Annual freezing and thawing cycles break up bedrock and force new crops of stones into plow zones each year, so farmers developed and standardized ways of removing the stone. They recorded in farming almanacs and handbooks of the time. They would pile stone on the boundaries of their land each year, and these stone piles would eventually grow to become emblematic New England stone walls. However, labor forces on these farms were often plural, consisting of a mixture of white farmers, white indentured servants, enslaved or formerly enslaved Africans, and Indian laborers. Thus, we have at least two distinct histories of practice (i.e., Indian memory piling and “plural” agricultural piling) that result in very similar archaeological “signatures.” It is also reasonable to note that on the farms mentioned above, the plural labor force viewed stone piling in a variety of ways based on different “habits.”

Second, there is evidence for a set of practices that has only recently come to light via archaeological excavations of Indian homes. The best example to date comes from the Eastern Pequot Reservation in North Stonington Connecticut, where Stephen Silliman (2009) reported excavating a small pit, located just outside an early 19th century Pequot household and filled with what we would typically refer to as refuse. The pit contained typical 19-century "trash," but included with the 19th-century materials were three ancient stone artifacts dating to thousands of years before the pit was in use. Additional evidence for this practice of placing artifacts of a “different time” close to Indian homes or communal structures is now beginning to surface in a number of different contexts in New England (Cipolla and McBride 2014). We could think of these practices as what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) refers to as *time-knots*[2] , though I see a very important distinction. Chakrabarty (2000:112) made the point that we live in worlds of mixed temporalities that western historians straighten into place as they create chronologies. This, according to Chakrabarty, is a highly subjective and colonial project in need of decolonization. The mixed temporalities in which he was primarily interested were unintentional occurrences (see Lucas 2005), that traditional western approaches to history glossed over, whereas I see the practices of deposition summarized here as intentional and possibly ceremonial assemblages, similar to the stone piling practices with which they might have co-occurred.

Third, in the spirit of pragmatism, we must also pay attention to the consumption side of Christian conversion, investigating on what grounds Christianity was accepted by Indian

communities and what it might have *become* as it was potentially knotted together with Algonquian spiritual practices that it clearly co-existed with on reservations. Historians and archaeologists have noted some interesting parallels between Algonquian spirituality and Christian religions introduced during the Great Awakening, particularly New Light Evangelism (Cipolla 2013a; 2013b; Silverman 2010). As an example of the ambiguous nature of Christian Indian religion, I briefly analyze one particular Christian Indian headstone that marks the grave of a Brothertown Indian woman. The Brothertown Indians are a multi-tribal Christian Indian community that left their traditional homelands on the East Coast and moved to New York and then Wisconsin in the 19th century (for a detailed discussion of this case, see Cipolla 2013a). The stone of Hannah Dick was carved and erected in 1855. It reads, "HANNAH DICK DIED Aug. 6 1855, Aged 88 y'rs & 7 mo's. Like the corn, fully ripe, To the grave thou has come, and thy savior in mercy, Has gathered thee home." Hannah was one of only a few Brothertown Indians that were actually born on the East Coast and had the experience of living in both Brothertown settlements. She was also known as a stubborn woman, and as the last fluent speaker of Narragansett in the settlement. We could simply read her headstone using Christian conventions: the homebound journey metaphor refers to going to Heaven. However, I would suggest that the reference to corn on her stone evinces a much more complicated set of meanings. From one set of "consumer" standpoints (i.e., those Brothertown Indians that purchased and/or read the stone and remembered Hannah), corn was deeply meaningful beyond serving as a food source and source of income. Going back to Roger Williams' 17th century writings, Narragansetts could tell that Cautantowwit lived to the southwest because as one walked in that direction, more and more corn grew. Cautantowwit, as the creator of people, later gave them corn as a gift (Bragdon 1996:188). Also important, in some Algonquian languages, the following terms share the root word *ohke*: grave, earth, mother, and planting corn (Trumbull 1903). So, what metaphoric home was Hannah headed back to? It would depend on who you asked in 19th-century Brothertown, but I would suggest an entangled space between Heaven and Cautantowwit's house, where she would transform into part of the community of ancestors and still be remembered as an individual with specific genealogical ties.

## What Difference Does Peirce Make? Summary and Concluding Thoughts

These three brief examples speak to the *continuities* between Algonquian spirituality and European-introduced forms of Christianity, and between what Levi-Strauss (1963; see also Lucas 2005) might have referred to as "mythic time" and historical time. So, what difference does Peirce make in my understandings of the materiality of stone heaps, in particular, and Christian conversion in general? From my perspective, Peirce's triadic, processual sign, along with the distinctions between icons, indices, and symbols (i.e., feeling, relations/reactions, and conventions) have much to offer archaeological theory. As

summarized in Table 1, the patterns discussed above illustrate a variety of different semiotic relations. Stone and brush heaps and memory holes, likely in use before European colonization and still used selectively today, indexed the movement of the living across the landscape in that holes and heaps sat alongside major footpaths. As signs, they afforded a level of ambiguity in that passersby required previous understanding/explanation in order to read them according to Algonquian convention. In the case of the stone heaps, they could be ancestors of a different time, originally made by Cautantowwit but then broken and scattered across the earth. These features also indexed social interaction in that they were disruptions on the landscape in the form of either a material presence (heaps) or a material absence (holes). These unexpected features inspired energetic interpretants to inquire with local people. As we see in the ethnohistoric record, local indigenous people were always reluctant to share this information with European and Euro-American outsiders.

| | **Stone heaps** | **Memory holes** | **Headstones** | **Deposits** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Known time range of use** | "Prehistory" to present | "Prehistory" to 17th century (possibly still in practice) | 18th century to present | 18th and 19th centuries (range based on limited data) |
| **Location** | Index living presence on landscape | Index living presence on landscape | Index presence of the dead on landscape | Index the living (at home, or in lived space, more generally) |
| **Associated social interaction** | Public but ambiguous | Public but ambiguous | Public but "conventional" | Private and ambiguous |
| **Sign function** | Material presence indexes social memory | Material absence indexes social memory | Material presence symbolizes social absence | Material presence indexes absence (ancestors) and presence (the living creating these assemblages), but quickly buried (hidden from view) |

**Table 1. Feature types**

As Christianity spread in indigenous communities of the Northeast, new patterns of material culture indexed the transition. Indigenous use of grave markers bearing text inscriptions began in the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Here we have a very different type of commemoration compared to the heaps and holes discussed above. Grave markers are a material presence on the landscape that index the

presence of the dead (and perhaps, likewise, the absence of the recently living). It is certainly true that the symbolism of the text inscriptions on such stones break with certain Algonquian traditions of forgetting in which the recently deceased were quickly eased into the community of the dead, becoming stone. However, as suggested by my interpretation of Hannah Dick's stone, even the conventions of language on these stones are subject to multiple, competing, and perhaps contradictory readings depending on the previous knowledge of the reader (Cipolla 2012, 2013a). While the heaps and piles inspired energetic interpretants, grave markers such as that of Hannah Dick, did not—at least to the same degree. Unlike stones heaps on the landscape that were ancestors of another time, grave markers represented ancestors of our time or of the historical past.

Most intriguing, and also the most tentative interpretation put forth in this essay, is the possibility that these new practices of grave marking that emerged with the spread of Christianity into Indian country also coincided with a new set of depositional practices in and around Indian homes. Further archaeological research is required to investigate both the temporal and geographical extent of these practices of intentional deposition, so for now this remains only an interesting possibility. Unlike the other materials and practices discussed in this essay, assemblages that I referred to as time-knots seemed to have been excessively private, perhaps only visible to members of the household or wider reservation community. The deposition of items of a recognizably different time speaks to the intentional knotting of temporalities. The location of these deposits indexed the living, usually the location of their homes or communal structures. However, the objects within these deposits indexed past human activity of a different time. I currently see these features or assemblages as a potential response to the disruption, violence, and uncertainty that indigenous groups faced at the time; however, these contexts also appear to evince a complex form of syncretic mixture between introduced forms of Christianity and secular time with Algonquian spiritual traditions and temporalities.

In the context of my present fieldwork, stones and stone heaps are ambiguous in the sense that they relate to several histories of habit and multiple semiotic chains that now exist in continuity with one another. In his recent book, *In Defense of Things*, Bjorner Olsen (2013:17), a leader in symmetrical archaeology, sets out his concerns as follows:

> A primary concern is with the ontology of things: what things are, how their difference affects our life, how their being challenges our conceptions of time and history, and why things, despite their importance, have been dismissed and ignored to such as extent in social science studies.

I fully agree that addressing these needs and inconsistencies is highly important for the discipline of archaeology. Unlike Olsen, however, I see a Peircean semiotic as relevant for these disciplinary problems. Unfortunately Olsen only mentions Peirce two times in the book. In the concluding chapter he notes a problem with certain dichotomous approaches in archaeology, seen "in the widely shared assumption that the sexiest significance of things always lies in their symbolic and representative functions, while their habitual everyday uses are trivial and of interest only to old fashioned 'folk' studies" (Olsen 2013:152). It is my hope that the brief and tentative examples discussed above help to illustrate how a Peircean semiotic approach helps in breaking these dichotomies that continue to create problems in archaeological interpretation. Where my opinion diverges from thinkers like Olsen is, again, seen in the importance I place on actual human agents and agency in human-non-human interactions. In this regard, my argument here parallels aspects of Severin Fowles' (2010) recent argument about people without things. He notes that recognizing the absence of things is an anthropocentric process, i.e., things are not absent unless there is a person there to recognize that something is missing. Likewise, the examples in this essay demonstrates the way in which people—human interpretants—and their associated histories of habit are essential components in creating and understanding the ambiguities surrounding stone. While the stone mentioned in the introduction of this paper forced itself on the poor enthusiastic student regardless of her intent, human habit and semiotic mediation are still central components of this interaction.

In a recent article, Oliver Harris and John Robb (2012) argue for the need to understand multiple ontologies. According to them, anthropologists must continue to focus on context, holism, and the temporal depth of practices observed in order to recognize multiple ontologies. They illustrate this point with reference to Martin Holbraad's (2007) work on Cuban diviners, where he notes that a type of powder (*ache*) is "not like power, does not represent power, and is not a metaphor for power: it actually is power" (Harris and Robb 2012:669). They rightfully point out the interpretive dangers of focusing only on moments of ontological alterity such as this, when, in other situations, Cuban diviners likely work within ontologies very similar to those of western anthropologists. Indeed, by only focusing on the meaning of ache powder in that one context, an interpreter runs the risk of truncating the semiotic chain that led to powder being power. Here I draw on Peirce; he offers us a framework through which to understand specific histories of habit (semiotic chains) linking to human interactions with material things, such as the ache in their example. A Peircean semiotic is not only a theory about representation, as my digging example illustrates, but rather a framework with which we can think about being and becoming in the material world. In my field project, stones are ancestors in deep time, the outcome of long-term geological processes, and/or the need to listen to your instructor and slow down your digging. Despite recent post-human concerns over semiotics, Peirce provides us with a theoretical framework to understand the bone-rattling

collision of our shovel with an unexpected stone, Algonquians collecting and heaping their stone ancestors—broken and scattered by Cautantowwit, and reading grave markers to remember ancestors and reconstruct the past.

## Endnotes

1. As Paul Kockelman discusses in his paper (at the 2013 AAA meeting) both of these items come to equilibrium with their respective environments.↩

2. This connection comes from the work of archaeologist David Robinson, who uses the concept of time-knots to discuss similar contexts of mixed temporalities encountered in the archaeological record.↩

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