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## The indigenous paleolithic of the Western hemisphere

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## BOOK REVIEW

***The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere.*** By Paulette Steeves. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE. 2021. USD \$65.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4962-0217-8, 326 pp., 10 illustrations, 5 maps, 7 tables.

Whence and when did humans first enter what is now known as the Americas? Such questions have long been considered by archaeologists, the majority of which are white scholars from North American institutions. This book offers an Indigenous perspective that challenges the reader to consider how such questions, and the knowledge produced by those working to answer them, serve as forms of Indigenous erasure. Steeves' (2021, 184) book is a worthy, albeit gentler in tone, successor to Vine Deloria Jr's (1997) *Red Earth, White Lies*, arguing "that the historically embedded boundary of recent post-LGM time for first migrations to the Western Hemisphere is not based on the archaeological record but is a political construct maintaining neocolonial power and control over Indigenous heritage". Her argument that the "existence of stories on the land, archaeological sites older than 12,000–15,000 years ago, and ancestral connections between ancient first peoples and contemporary Indigenous communities are empowering to Indigenous people" (p. 186) cannot be denied.

In eight well-researched and wide-ranging chapters, Steeves argues that the "Clovis First Hypothesis"—that fluted point-bearing peoples entered the continent through an Ice-Free Corridor around ~13,500 cal BP—is rooted in and structured by a system of colonial oppression, constructed to maintain power and control over Indigenous heritage, material remains, and history (p. 15). Terms frequently used by archaeologists, such as "Clovis Culture" or "People," for example, which define Clovis as "panhemispheric cultural groups based on one tool type" (p. 13), serve to erase and homogenize culturally and materially diverse groups of peoples. Readers should not confuse this argument as a personal attack on those that endorse the hypothesis, but as a challenge to archaeologists to consider how knowledge about the initial peopling process is created, and by whom. Archaeologists must acknowledge the critical work of Indigenous scholarship, especially as Indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, and histories have commonly been ignored and/or excluded from academic curricula. Steeves makes her case that archaeologists should be open to more complex, dynamic, and significantly older narratives and she highlights important issues that archaeologists would be wise to consider.

By decolonizing Indigenous histories and recentering oral traditions and perspectives as evidence, Steeves argues, we can "rebuild bridges to ancestral places and times, which American archaeology burned in political fires of power and control" (p. 181). As this book demonstrates, such perspectives stand to shed light on paleoenvironments, extinct fauna, and of course, the timing and presence of the earliest peoples in the Western Hemisphere (Chapter 4). Steeves argues that the "Clovis Hypothesis" patently ignores oral traditions and histories that suggest peoples were in the Americas much longer than conventionally thought, perhaps more than 100,000 years ago.

Because this book is an extended polemical essay rather than an analytical or interpretive discourse on the findings of archaeology, it is at times repetitive and—no doubt deliberately—one-sided. The voices of archaeologists who have worked on the Clovis First hypothesis are not heard. Fair enough; they have had the podium to themselves long enough. However, Steeves does miss an opportunity by not referring to David Meltzer's (2015) book *The Great Paleolithic War*, which would have provided some historical nuance to her efforts to trace the history of the "Clovis First" hypothesis (Chapter 2). She might also have discussed the Heliocentric theory of Elliot Grafton Smith and William Parry which was current in the early twentieth century. Their hyperdiffusionist theory posited that all civilizations began with Egypt and were diffused to places like Mesoamerica depriving the Indigenous

peoples of the Americas credit for their own achievements in constructing civilizations. Many archaeologists at the time were appalled by the potential racist ideology that attached itself to a theory that denied agency and inventiveness to the native peoples of the Americas and turned against diffusion and transoceanic contact. Curiously, this attempt to preserve the Indigenous peoples of the Americas from being painted as passive recipients of “Old-World civilization” led to a long period when archaeologists turned a blind eye to evidence of contacts or exchanges or travel between the hemispheres, which contributed to the embrace later in the century of the Clovis First hypothesis of the single-entry, one-time-only, late settlement of the western hemisphere.


JICA readers will be particularly interested in Chapters 5 and 6, where Steeves discusses archaeological sites that, she argues, are evidence for pre-Clovis occupations in North and South America, many of which demand consideration of alternative hypotheses of initial migration routes. To that point, Steeves could have spent time discussing the emerging evidence for a Pacific Coastal route. Steeves also provides a list of over 169 purported pre-Clovis sites in the Appendices. While lists of potential pre-Clovis sites are necessary for future research, it is important to note that Steeves does not include critiques offered by archaeologists on many of them. It is unwise from any perspective to accept an archaeological site because it bolsters a hypothesis without rigorous evaluation of stratigraphic integrity, contextual associations, and site formation processes. Moreover, we cannot dismiss the scientific method. It remains the best way to evaluate archaeological sites for understanding the dynamic processes of the peopling of the Western Hemisphere, especially if a better job is done of acknowledging and using oral histories and traditions that suggest certain areas were inhabited much earlier than scientific data suggest. Hypotheses are to be tested; not dismissed *a priori*.

*The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere* offers a refreshing perspective of the peopling of what was once called the New World. As we continue to unravel the complexities inherent within this process, we hope this book will have many readers. Indeed, in our view this book should be mandatory reading for archaeologists, so that, hopefully, it will lead to a field that is more diverse, multivocal, and critical.

## References

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