

Living in our Globalized World: Notes 14  
**Appealing myths: Steckley Chapter 4**  
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- Steckley: *White Lies About the Inuit: Chapter 4, The Myth of the Blond Eskimo*, pp. 77-102
- More illustrations of the social construction of knowledge:
  - Stories about “lost races”, especially of Europeans, particularly Norse in the Arctic, were common from 1890 through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in popular culture of entertainment fiction
    - 1890: *The Ke Whonkus People*
    - 1890: Serialized story of ancient Nordic race discovered in Northern Greenland
    - another in 1894, another in 1895...
  - First reports of Copper Inuit
    - 1850 McClure expedition
      - friendly encounter
      - after being trapped for two (three?) years, abandoned the ship and supplies to the Inuit and were rescued by another expedition
    - 1851 Collinson expedition
      - brief encounter
  - First claims that they were “blond” (actually “red haired”)
    - 1905-6 encounters by Christian Klengenber; met with Stefansson in 1907
    - 1910 Stefansson visited Copper Inuit, declared them “blond”
  - Interpretations
    - the idea was already out there, waiting to be exploited
    - the idea was easily accepted as fact because people had gotten used to hearing it as fiction
      - it would seem exciting, but not so unfamiliar as to be outlandish
  - Today it seems outrageous that an idea that started in pulp fiction for boys could be converted into common “knowledge”, taken seriously by much of the public, only 20 years later
  - Do times really change?
    - Can we be so sure that some features of common “knowledge” today won’t look as absurd in fifty years?
      - UFOs?
      - Conspiracy theories about 9/11?
      - it is hard to detect these things, since the whole point is that they are widely believed...
- More illustrations of “useful knowledge”
  - Vilhjalmur Stefansson used claims of finding and investigating “blond Eskimos” to promote his speaking career and gain funding for expeditions
    - later claimed that the popular press had exaggerated, misquoted, etc.
    - but clearly encouraged, and benefitted from, that supposed misrepresentation
  - Farley Mowat, in 1998 (!), published a pop-“science” book, *The Farfarers: Before the Norse*, recycling the debunked blond Eskimo claims
    - Like Erich Von Daniken (*Chariots of the Gods*, etc.), Mowat seems to be a willful fabricator – albeit maybe with more altruistic intentions

- Von Daniken’s big-selling books (*Chariots of the Gods*, etc.) were flat-out, intentional, money-making frauds
  - full of interviews that never occurred, faked “ancient” artifacts, wild misstatements and carefully selected or omitted evidence, etc.
  - absolutely, thoroughly debunked by numerous archaeologists and historians
  - Von Daniken even spent several years in prison for embezzlement...
- Yet the History Channel aired two seasons of “Ancient Aliens” in 2010, and a third this year, 2011!
  - <http://www.history.com/shows/ancient-aliens>
  - and it is promoted on Von Daniken’s website...
- popular “knowledge” like this seems to be immortal
  - Steckley said that the Internet is the old age home for decrepit ideas
  - I would add that documentaries do much the same
  - both get outdated, rejected ideas into the minds of journalists, elementary school teachers, and so on
  - which keep the ideas around long after they should be discarded
  - this, too, is a process of the social construction (or in this case, maintenance) of knowledge
- This “knowledge” is “useful” for Mowat and Von Daniken because they make money selling their books, lectures, etc.
  - and that “usefulness” encourages them to keep promoting the ideas
  - ... more social construction of knowledge...
- Gísli Pálsson (University of Iceland) used the blond Eskimo claim to justify (and presumably fund) collection and analysis of DNA samples from 350 Inuit
  - he is a serious scholar
  - and debunking the Blond Eskimo story is a reasonable thing to do
  - but you can see how he dredged up an old, scientifically-discarded theory because it still rings a bell in people’s minds due to pop-culture myth
  - a great hook to hang a research grant proposal on – that is “useful knowledge”
    - Pálsson has subsequently published further DNA research with Inuit samples
    - apparently many from the same locations... the very same samples?
  - and it keeps the idea in circulation even longer
    - although the end result was effectively conclusive evidence against it
  - again: there is nothing wrong with all this, but it does illustrate one case of how knowledge is socially constructed and maintained in circulation
    - don’t bet against a future History Channel series about the mystery of the Blond Eskimo...
- another similar, current example: just a few days ago, there was yet another “discovery” that disproves the “Clovis first” hypothesis
  - the “Clovis first” hypothesis suggests that the first people to populate the New World were big-game hunters who made Clovis-style spear points
    - they would have arrived in North America no earlier than around 11,250 BC
  - The recent find is a mastadon rib with a bone spearpoint stuck in it, both carefully radiocarbon dated to about 11,800 BC

- at least 500 years before the earliest evidence of the Clovis tool tradition
- Science 334:351-353, Oct. 21, 2011
- <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/334/6054/351.abstract>
- But “Clovis first” has been “disproved” by some discovery dated prior to 11,000 BC every few years since I was an undergraduate
  - no serious, informed person could reasonably still believe the “Clovis first” hypothesis
- but it still seems to be a great way to get press coverage and grant funding
  - so this theory keeps getting resuscitated and propped up by people who should know better
- Point: Once again, for your second presentations, or for almost any other popular knowledge, such as the characteristics of some “Other”, think about
  - how these “facts” are constructed
  - why those particular ideas become widely accepted
  - why, if they seem incorrect, they have been so hard to dislodge from the body of popular “knowledge”
    - especially when they seem to be ones that could easily be disproved
    - like “Immigrants tend to be criminals”
      - (statistically simply not true, unless you count their presence in the US as criminal in itself)
  - who benefits from believing or promoting this “knowledge”
  - in the context of globalization, contact between cultures, and your second presentations, these questions might lead you to insights about
    - the ideas that members of one group have about members of another group
    - their ideas about things that happened in the past
  - these “facts” might be useful to
    - individual leaders seeking to mobilize support
      - who may be less concerned with literal truth than their goals of getting something done
    - the members of a group at large
      - if the ideas allow them to
        - feel superior
        - legitimize their claims for land, compensation, special privileges, etc.
        - find a seemingly rational, fair justification for what otherwise would be obviously racist or ethnocentric discrimination