

COMMENTARY ARTICLE

A Pathway to Reconciliation within ‘North American’ Archaeology

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Editor’s Note:

This article originated as a blog post and is meant to be an accessible, casual discussion of a serious topic. Pathways Journal is committed to representing academic voices on human studies in a variety of styles and topics, including this condensed approach to commentary. For further discussion on some of the topics raised in this commentary, see Fender’s article “Addressing the Alien in the Room: Why Public Perception is Imperative to the Field of Archaeology” on page 29 of this volume.

Abstract:

As we begin to enter an era of reconciliation in archaeology, we must look at the foundation upon which the discipline has been built and start to dismantle the colonial ideologies which have been embedded within. A number of new practices and approaches have emerged over the past decade, through community and public based archaeology, placing the community at the forefront of the research. These newer approaches have set out to challenge the ways in which the discipline had been conducted previously, creating pathways forward for reconciliation. The following commentary is based on my experience as a student researcher and professional archaeologist over the past six years — experience which has been shaped by my identity and the lens it informs and which offers only one perspective towards the important and emerging narrative on reconciliation within archaeology.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge my positionality as a researcher. I am a Canadian archaeologist of Euro-settler descent and do not come from the communities in which I carry out my research and subsequent projects. The following commentary is based on my experience as a student researcher and professional archaeologist over the past six years, experience which has been shaped by my identity and the lens it informs and which offers only one perspective towards the important and emerging narrative on reconciliation within archaeology.

“Whom and what does your research help?”

This is one of the first questions my would-be supervisor asked me when I wanted to enter graduate school to complete a Master of Arts degree in Archaeology. At the time, I remember thinking how a question, so seemingly simple, could be so daunting.

How could my research help the living community?

How could I ensure that my work would have impact beyond me, beyond just checking off boxes to complete a degree?

‘North American’ archaeology or ‘American’ archaeology focuses on Indigenous human occupation, spanning tens

of thousands of years¹, across the continent of North America. The discipline of archaeology—and its academic institutional origins—has a dark past, one rooted deeply in European colonialism. Colonialism, brought forth by European explorers, was used to justify the oppression of non-European societies through social, political, and economic control. Early within the discipline, archaeologists and anthropologists² began to explore these newly colonized areas, conducting research by spending long periods of time with the people of these regions. This engagement would become the precursor for participant observation, a method through which researchers actively participate in community activities to gain a deeper understanding of the internal structures of their society or culture³.

However, due to the colonial European ideologies predominant during this time, these encounters were typically rooted in Eurocentric⁴ and race-based theories and methods. Many of the ideas about culture were inspired by naturalist Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. These frameworks were informed by the idea of unilineal evolution, a social theory suggesting that all human groups evolve in stages. Unilineal evolution

categorized human groups based on a linear idea of social progress, ranging from “simple” to “complex” based on a variety of criterion.

Unfortunately, these explorations came at a cost: not to those conducting the research, but at the expense of those being researched.

It was during this time that salvage anthropology was born, and the rush began to document these communities as much as possible before they disappeared or “evolved” due to their exposure to “advanced” European ways. However, these “advanced” European ways brought new obstacles to Indigenous groups across North America, including exposure to new diseases, forced assimilation, genocide, conflict, and more. These lasting negative impacts of European immigration and eventual colonization of the continent decimated Indigenous populations, contributing to the scramble to document these communities before they were gone. This race to document, preserve, and “save” these communities ironically contributed to the disruption of knowledge transmission and the loss of cultural traditions through the taking of cultural materials, both tangible and intangible (i.e., tangible cultural belongings and intangible oral histories and knowledge).

¹ This is a rough estimate based on archaeological data, which is still highly contested, and likely to change with the uncovering of new archaeological sites indefinitely. Oral histories from Indigenous communities indicate occupation of North America since time immemorial.

² Anthropology, or the study of humanity, comprises biological anthropology, sociocultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and archaeology. Archaeology and anthropology are included here to denote the study of both the human past and the human present.

³ Early on within the field of anthropology, researchers could conduct studies and make conclusions on communities or cultures without ever having been in contact with them. This type of research, later called *armchair anthropology*, was quickly rejected by scholars as serious problems arose from this approach, such as the production of inaccuracies and biased claims. After this short-lived attempt, the idea that the researcher should spend time with and in the communities they sought to understand rose to the forefront of the discipline and paved the path for what anthropology is today. Following this time period, Bronislaw Malinowski, an anthropologist during the early 1900s, developed participant observation while conducting fieldwork to approach the study of cultures in a more human way, where the researcher actively participated in the community. See more at <https://perspectives.pressbooks.com/chapter/doing-fieldwork-methods-in-cultural-anthropology/>

⁴ Eurocentric is defined as “reflecting a tendency to interpret the world in terms of European or Anglo-American values and experiences” (see <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Eurocentric>). Often these interpretations also were biased by ethnocentric views, which was “based on the attitude that one's own group is superior” (see <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethnocentric>).

Over time, with the continued resilience of Indigenous communities and revitalization of traditional practices, these European ideas of “evolution” were challenged and ultimately rejected, allowing for the more standardized and culturally relative study of cultures and societies to emerge. New requirements, such as formal training and peer-review, were developed to combat these early ideologies that were no longer accepted by the academic world. As a result, researchers began to be held accountable to maintain the relationships with the communities in which they worked, as well as honouring their obligations that were agreed upon throughout the extent of the research being conducted, which many had failed to do early on within the discipline.

Although the discipline has and continues to change—as all human cultural things do—remnants of these colonial ideologies remain, embedded within the foundation upon which archaeology was built. In light of this acknowledgment, we are then faced with another question; how do we, as emerging researchers, as the beneficiaries of these established disciplines, change a system from within?

As an undergraduate student, I had many interests with little certainty about what specific field I wanted to study. I blindly went into an elective first year archaeology course, curious about the history of the human past and intrigued by adventures of the fictitious, yet infamous, Indiana Jones⁵ dancing around my head. Today—eight years later—here I am, almost finished with my master's degree in archaeology and, along with never fully committing to the fedora, I am much less destructive (e.g., no temple ransacking) and will wager that I take vastly better field notes than our whip-snapping, boobytrap-dodging heartthrob.

But even still, my curiosity and passion for the past has not dimmed but brightened. And while I had initially planned to pursue my graduate studies conducting archaeological research within Europe, a summer field school on the Northwest Coast of North America changed all these plans. All because of one word: “Community.”

Community archaeology is distinctive in that the living descendants or communities are actively involved in the research process (to whatever extent or capacity that they wish to be). From initial planning to sharing results both within the community and to the broader public (according to community wishes), this approach to research uses multiple perspectives to connect the past to the present.

This newer approach challenges the ways in which archaeology had been conducted for so many decades before, creating paths for collaboration and connection under a new framework with the same communities that lost so much at the hands of the same discipline. This integrated relationship ensures that the mistakes of our discipline's past are not repeated, placing the community at the forefront of the research, making sure that their needs are not only met but are also not superseded by institutional demands.

A researcher's obligations to both the community and institution are sometimes difficult to balance. This balancing act becomes increasingly challenging due to restrictions on resources, funds, and time. However, accepting these complex (and at times conflicting) responsibilities is necessary if we are to reinvent the foundations on which archaeological research is conducted within North America.

How community archaeology looks in terms of ‘boots on the ground’ is entirely dependent on the project and the level of

⁵ Dr. Henry Walton ‘Indiana’ Jones, Jr., a professor of archaeology (fictional), was made famous through his adventures of saving artifacts and punching Nazis throughout several movies (beginning in 1981). Although through these escapades, he arguably destroyed more material culture than he saved, his impact on the image of archaeology will last forever.

collaboration. To me, it involved site visits, community-days, ceremonies, interviews, youth programs, and more—events made possible due to a relationship built on mutual respect, cultivated over a decade of work by my graduate supervisor/predecessors, and maintained by ongoing reciprocity and partnership.

Public archaeology involves the inclusion of the public within the archaeological process. Although this may be different project to project, this methodology is based on active engagement and interest from the public (e.g., volunteer digs, field visits, research presentations, and more). By creating this interaction between the public and academic sphere, archaeology can become more accessible and meaningful. Instead of taking the information that researchers have gained from their studies and relaying this knowledge solely through articles locked behind paywalls or as brief presentations at expensive 'membership-access' conferences, archaeology can act as a pathway for communities to reconnect to their past, supporting their active involvement in telling the story of who they are.

Reconciliation, within this context, refers to the creation of positive and respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples within North America and beyond. This occurs through the understanding and acknowledgment of colonization and its effects on Indigenous populations, and the imperative movement away from the structures that are still upholding these ideologies today. With the creation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁶ and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action⁷ documents, we may begin

developing new ways to steer away from these colonial beginnings, using these texts as our guiding principles. If we truly want to enter an era of reconciliation within archaeology, and mend our relationships to create positive, mutually beneficial collaborations, we must begin changing how we structure our research and projects to allow for open engagement, collaboration, and discussions. By practicing community archaeology, we, as researchers, must work with communities to understand what they want or need, to listen, to actively help, to support, and, through these efforts, to begin and continue to give back—back to those whose communities gave (or had taken away) so much.

⁶ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

⁷ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action
https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf