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Reflections on a Decade of Practice in Indigenous Archaeologies: A Perspective from Canada

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Abstract

My first attempt at applying a perspective grounded in Indigenous archaeology to the study of cultural landscapes arose from my dissertation research in 2014 (Amundsen-Meyer 2014a). I attempted to braid Indigenous and Western knowledge (i.e., Wall Kimmerer 2013) to more fully understand the past, which I firmly believed was the way forward to decolonize the discipline of archaeology. Since 2019, I have had the privilege of working with, for and on the Siksika First Nation and of learning from many Elders and Knowledge Holders in the community. Reflecting on these experiences, I have begun to wonder if braiding knowledge may, in some cases, contribute to ongoing colonialism in archaeology. This paper will explore the concept of Indigenous archaeology and pose questions and put forward suggestions for future collaborative work as we come to terms with the longstanding colonial history of our discipline.

Keywords:
Indigenous archaeologies, decolonization, community-based research, worldviews, allyship, reconciliation

Introduction: Beginnings

> *'[I] ask my non-Indigenous peers to consider their roles in the ongoing colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples. The colonial moment has not passed. The conditions that fostered it have not suddenly disappeared.' (Todd 2016, 16)*

In 2014, I successfully defended my dissertation titled *Nested Landscapes: Ecological and Spiritual Use of Plains Landscape During the Late Prehistoric Period* (Amundsen-Meyer 2014a), my first attempt at applying a perspective grounded in Indigenous archaeology to the study of cultural landscapes. In this study, I examined settlement patterns along the Old North Trail in southern Alberta, the traditional homeland of the Blackfoot people, to assess what I considered 'competing' models of land use: those based in ecology and those in ideology. For me, a key finding in my dissertation research was the realization that these two concepts – ecology and ideology – were not competing, but when viewed through the lens of a Blackfoot worldview (see, for example, Bastien 2004; LaPier 2017) are complementary and inseparable (Amundsen-Meyer 2014a).

In this study and the years following, I firmly subscribed to the goal of braiding Indigenous and Western knowledge (Atalay 2006; Wall Kimmerer 2013; Zedeño et al. 2021). I have taught this concept to undergraduate and graduate students as a way forward to decolonize the discipline of archaeology (see, for example, Amundsen-Meyer et al. 2023), which still struggles to come to terms with and move forward from a history grounded in colonial goals and practices

(Atalay 2006; 2008; Silliman 2008; Supernant/Warrick 2014; Todd 2016). I have developed research objectives that aim to demonstrate how inclusive understandings can braid together scientific and traditional cultural knowledge to create more meaningful interpretations of the past and have benefited from this work including through a successful Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Development Grant.

Since 2019, I have had the privilege of working with, for and on the Siksika First Nation and of learning from many Elders and Knowledge Holders in the community. This work was conducted in partnership with Old Sun Community College, with the permission of Siksika Nation Chief and Council and under a permit from the Siksika Lands Department. As I began to build relationships with Siksika community members, I set out with the best of intentions to braid knowledge as a means of demonstrating how decolonization of archaeology is possible. I wanted our work to be a test case that could demonstrate to regulators and other researchers how this could be a successful path forward for the discipline. Increasingly, though, the experiences I have had and the teachings I have received suggest that this approach was simplistic and perhaps a little naïve. Reflecting on these experiences, I have begun to wonder if advocating for braiding of knowledge and the inclusion of oral tradition in archaeological interpretation is, in some circumstances, simply another form of ongoing settler-colonialism.

I write this from the perspective of a non-Indigenous settler, descended from Norwegian immigrants, who lives and works in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. This place is known to the Blackfoot as Mokinsstsis, meaning 'elbow,' in reference to its location at the confluence of the Bow and Elbow Rivers (Blackfoot Gallery Committee 2001). My connections to the place we now call Alberta start at Claresholm in the early 20th century, when my ancestors arrived as part of a wave of settlers who, following the signing of *Treaty 7* in 1877, dispossessed North American Indigenous communities of their traditional homelands on the Northwestern Plains. While I have worked for over a decade to incorporate Blackfoot worldviews and traditions into archaeological study, I am not Blackfoot nor am I Indigenous. It is important to note that, in this paper, I speak only for myself, and not for Blackfoot communities or any community members whom I have the privilege to know.

Kisha Supernant (2020, 3) poses the question, 'What do we need to face about our discipline before we can begin to engage with reconciliation?' Knowing that the colonial moment has not passed (Tuck/Yang 2012; Todd 2016; Montgomery/Supernant 2022), this paper reflects on and considers the complex interplay between archaeologists and Indigenous descendant communities, as well as how these interactions both contribute to and combat ongoing settler-colonialism.

The Northwestern Plains: Blackfoot country

The Blackfoot Confederacy (Niitsitapi) is composed of four tribes (the Siksika, Piikani and Kainai in Alberta, Canada and the Amsskaapipikani in Montana, USA). Before the arrival of European settlers, the Blackfoot homeland stretched from the Rocky Mountains in the west to the Great Sand Hills in the east, and from the Yellowstone River in the south to the North Saskatchewan River in the north, covering large parts of southern Alberta, southern Saskatchewan and Montana (Blackfoot Gallery Committee 2001). According to Blackfoot Elders, the Niitsitapi have occupied these lands since time immemorial (Blackfoot Gallery Committee 2001).

Traditionally, the Blackfoot were mobile hunter-gatherers whose seasonal round, which began with the first thunder in the spring, took them from foothills/parkland in winter to the prairie in summer. During this cyclical movement, the Blackfoot moved tipi villages across the plains with dog – later horse – travois, visiting important places in the cultural landscape, performing rituals to maintain their connection to the land and accessing needed resources (Oetelaar G. A./Oetelaar D. G. 2006; Brink 2008; Amundsen-Meyer 2014a). The entire homeland was cared for by the Blackfoot as a whole. No defined system of land tenure existed; each band held the rights to hunt and collect resources where they were camped but did not have exclusive rights to the land itself (Kidd 1986).

The first European to visit the Blackfoot homeland was Anthony Henday in 1754. Henday was followed by many others, including Alexander Mackenzie (1789–1793), David Thompson (1786–1808) and Peter Fidler (1792–1793), among others (Carter 1999; Friesen 2002). During this period and earlier, the Blackfoot and other Indigenous groups were impacted by the introduction of European diseases, including (but not limited to) smallpox (e.g., 1780, 1819, 1837, 1869), measles (e.g., 1819) and scarlet fever (e.g., 1864). Blackfoot winter counts have allowed the identification of more than 36 major epidemics, which

are estimated to have reduced the Blackfoot population by at least 60% (Grinnell 1962; Kidd 1986; Carter 1999; Francis et al. 2004; Glenbow Museum 2012).

By the late 1700s, inland fur trading posts were established along the Saskatchewan River by the Hudson's Bay Company and Canadian traders from Montreal (who later amalgamated as the Northwest Company). The flow of trade goods and trade alcohol to Indigenous groups increased at this time and, consequently, changes in their culture were greatly accelerated. By 1780, the Blackfoot began trading directly with fur traders on the North Saskatchewan River. They preferred to focus on the equestrian bison hunt, trading excess pemmican with Europeans (Binnema 1996; Carter 1999; Friesen 2002; Colpitts 2014). By the turn of the 18th century, trading companies had substantial establishments at today's Edmonton and Rocky Mountain House. These, along with small wintering posts, attracted traders from the resident foothills and plains bands – Piikáni, Stoney, Cree, Tsuu T'ina and Assiniboine; people from the plains and parklands – Siksiká, Kainaa, Atsina and Cree; and people of the northern forest – Cree and Dene (Binnema 1996; Carter 1999; Friesen 2002).

During the late 1800s, commercial hunters killed bison *en masse* to procure hides for the international robe trade. These hides were used to make industrial machines belts in Europe (Taylor 2011; Colpitts 2014). Concentrated Indigenous hunting, designed to produce a large amount of pemmican, was undertaken – particularly by the Métis, who were heavily involved in provisions trading with the Hudson's Bay Company (Binnema 2001; Cooper 2008; Colpitts 2014). American traders set up whiskey posts in the Canadian West, trading alcohol – mixed with toxins such as gun powder and strychnine – to Indigenous people for bison hides and robes. This led to increasing levels of violence and, ultimately, the formation of the Northwest Mounted Police in 1873 (Friesen 2002; Francis et al. 2004). The Plains bison were largely destroyed on the Canadian Plains by 1879, a result of both hunting by settlers to the region and the provisions trade (Dobak 1996; Colpitts 2014).

The Blackfeet and the United States government signed the *Judith River Treaty* in 1855. *Treaty 7*, an agreement between the Government of Canada, the three Canadian Blackfoot tribes (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), Sarcee (T'suu'tina) and Stoney Nakoda, was signed in 1877 (Hildebrandt et al. 1996; Dempsey 2015). The treaties led to momentous and irrevocable impacts on Indigenous lifeways and livelihoods. Bison had become scarce by this time, and Indigenous peoples were forcibly confined to their reserves (Dobak 1996; Carter 1999; Friesen 2002; Francis et al. 2004; Taylor 2011; Glenbow Museum 2012; Dempsey 2015). Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and incarcerated in residential schools across Blackfoot country and beyond, as part of a systematic effort to assimilate the region's Indigenous populations into Eurocentric society (Simons et al. 2021).

This may not be the context you were expecting in a paper about theoretical paradigms in archaeology. But this context is crucial to situating my own practice of Indigenous archaeologies within a settler-colonial state. The historical and ongoing colonization of North America have severed connections between Indigenous communities, the land and their culture, creating power imbalances that have shaped an often exploitative relationship with Indigenous peoples. Archaeology is no exception. Archaeological projects were (and often are) designed and implemented through a patriarchal lens, creating biased narratives of the past (McNiven/Russell 2005; Meskell 2012; Blakey 2020; Rivera Prince et al. 2022; Beliso-De Jesús et al. 2023).

Indigenous archaeologies

Indigenous archaeology as a theoretical paradigm arose in the 1990s, responding to the colonial history and practice of the discipline (Watkins 2000; 2005; Atalay 2006; Silliman 2008; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010). In the Canadian context, the publication of *At a Crossroads: Archaeology and First Peoples in Canada* (Nicholas/Andrews 1997) marks the beginning of a period in which Indigenous voices have begun to take a stronger role in archaeology (see, for example, Yellowhorn 2000; 2002; 2015; Reimer/Yumks 2003; 2010; 2012; Brownlee 2010; Yellowhorn/Hickok 2012; Steeves 2015; Supernant 2017; 2018; Beaulieu 2018; 2022; Wadsworth et al. 2021a; 2021b).

Reflecting the diversity of Indigenous communities and perspectives across the globe, a single definition of an Indigenous archaeological paradigm is difficult. For this reason, Steven Silliman (2008, 2) suggested that 'a better term is perhaps indigenous archaeolog*ies*.' Most simply, Indigenous archaeologies have been defined as archaeology that is done with, for and by Indigenous communities (Nicholas 1997). Ultimately, those subscribing to the paradigm of Indigenous archaeology recognize that Indigenous communities have not only a stake in the

past, but also have real, reciprocal and ongoing relationships with their ancestors and their ancestor's belongings. As a result, Indigenous archaeologies know that descendant communities must be consulted and engaged within any archaeological project (Atalay 2006; Silliman 2008; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; Klassen 2013; Supernant 2018). In practice, Indigenous archaeologists advocate for collaborative approaches in which archaeology is guided by descendant communities. These approaches share the goal of a responsive, community-based archaeology centred on Indigenous worldviews, needs and protocols, striving for multivocality (Atalay 2006; Silliman 2008; Supernant 2018). Indigenous archaeologies attempt to address inequalities in the practice of archaeology and to create more meaningful understandings of the past by incorporating Indigenous worldviews and traditional cultural knowledge (Atalay 2006; Nicholas 2008; Supernant/Warrick 2014).

Emerging from this paradigm shift was a push among researchers to decolonize the discipline of archaeology (Smith/Wobst 2005; Atalay 2006; Nicholas 2006; Smith/Jackson 2006; Atalay 2012; Supernant/Warrick 2014; Connaughton/Herbert 2017; Supernant 2018). One of the concepts commonly referenced in discussions of Indigenous archaeologies as a method of decolonization (Atalay 2006, for example) and in Indigenous science more broadly (Wall Kimmerer 2013, for example), is the idea of 'braiding' knowledge. This approach, which I attempted to apply in my own dissertation research and beyond (Amundsen-Meyer 2014a; 2014b), works to bring together scientific and Indigenous cultural knowledge to create a well-rounded and inclusive understanding of a particular problem. In addition to settler scholars, several Indigenous scholars have discussed the interconnection of Indigenous worldviews and scientific understandings and worked to define where we can find a shared ethical space for collaboration (i.e., Cajete 2000; Little Bear 2000; Wilson 2003; Wall Kimmerer 2013). Within archaeology, an approach which brings together these different ways of knowing was advocated for by one of the foundational scholars in Indigenous archaeology, Sonya Atalay (2006, 297), who states:

> *'…in the approach I am advocating for, Indigenous forms of science, history, and heritage management should be researched and then blended with Western concepts to produce Indigenous archaeology methods, theories, and practices that are ethical and socially just and put forward as models of a decolonized archaeology.'*

In discussing the practice of anthropology, Kainai scholar Leroy Little Bear (2000, 81) notes that '[anthropologists] have done a fairly decent job of describing the customs themselves, but they have failed miserably in finding and interpreting the meaning behind the customs.' Braiding knowledge is designed to address this legacy of colonialism in archaeology because, if we interpret the past without a culturally specific understanding, we will never truly understand what the belongings and features we identify in the archaeological record represent or what they meant to the people who used them.

In addition to creating more meaningful understandings of the past, this braiding of knowledge has the potential to alter the methods, theories and practices we apply in archaeological study. For example, 'catch and release' surface collection methods of archaeology have been employed by archaeologist Sara Gonzalez and the Kashia Tribal Preservation Office to meet the specific needs and protocols of the Kashaya Pomo. In this catch-and-release archaeology, belongings are recorded and returned to their original context on the landscape, rather than collected and curated in a long-term repository, such as a museum (Gonzalez 2017; see also Lightfoot 2008). When we alter our practices guided by Indigenous epistemologies, archaeology has the added potential to begin to counteract aspects of settler-colonialism and to reconnect descendant communities with the land (see, for example, Schaepe et al. 2017).

Increasingly, both Indigenous and settler scholars undertaking Indigenous archaeologies have worked to apply the perspectives and methods of braiding knowledge, often with great success (Yellowhorn/Hickok 2012; Yellowhorn 2015; Supernant 2017; Beaulieu 2018; 2022; Wadsworth et al. 2021a; 2021b; Zedeño et al. 2021; Angelbeck et al. 2024; Lazette 2024; Wilson et al. 2024). Studies such as these have certainly brought positive change to archaeological practice and increased the number of Indigenous voices in archaeological study. Yet, numerous authors have challenged us to consider if bringing Indigenous voices in greater number into archaeology has addressed any of the underlying colonial structures of our discipline (Martindale 2014; Supernant/Warrick 2014; Todd 2016; Supernant 2018).

Métis scholar Zoe Todd (2016, 16) powerfully draws attention to this concern, stating:

> *'Is it so simple, though? To draw such arbitrary lines through intergenerational suffering and colonial trauma, to absolve the European academy and the European mind of any guilt in the genocide of Indigenous people (if and when European and North American actors are willing to admit it is a genocide)? And then to turn around and use Indigenous cosmologies and knowledge systems in a so-called new intellectual 'turn', all the while ignoring the contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples vis-à-vis colonial nation-states, or the many Indigenous thinkers who are themselves writing about these issues?'*

A personal paradigm shift

My dissertation research explored ways to braid together scientific and cultural knowledge in the study of the Blackfoot cultural landscape (Amundsen-Meyer 2014a). At the time, I had no significant relationships with members of any Blackfoot community and relied on ethnographies (Wissler/Duvall 1908; Wissler 1910; Grinnell 1962; Kidd 1986, among others) and a limited number of works by Blackfoot authors (i.e., Bastien 2004) to inform my understanding of Blackfoot worldviews and traditional practices. While I recognized that this was not the ideal approach and that it would be better to speak directly with Blackfoot Elders and Knowledge Holders, the time constraints of graduate school are a limiting factor. Building relationships of trust with these individuals, who have so often borne the brunt of colonialism, takes time. Five years after completing my dissertation, when I began work with the Siksika Nation, I hoped to move beyond this reliance on written documents and to build relationships with Elders and Knowledge Holders that would allow us to bring our knowledge together to create more meaningful understandings of this region's past.

I certainly have been successful in building relationships and now count several Siksika Elders, Knowledge Holders and community members as colleagues and friends. As Todd (2016, 4) notes, however, 'Personal paradigm shifts have a way of sneaking up on you.' The more I have learned from these individuals and the more opportunities I have had to experience aspects of Blackfoot culture important to them, the more I have questioned if my concept of braiding knowledge is an appropriate goal to strive for, or if it instead contributes to ongoing colonization of the descendant community with which I work.

One particular interaction brought this question into clear focus for me. I had been working in partnership with Old Sun Community College for a couple of years and was meeting with staff from the College and members of our Elders advisory group. Over several years of archaeological excavation, we had uncovered fire features which appeared to be constructed in a standardized form but did not align with common archaeological understandings of fire features on the Northwestern Plains. In our meeting, we were reviewing these atypical features and discussing the possibility of having a Master's student conduct a detailed study on them. I suggested that this thesis could examine the features archaeologically and also consult with Elders to elicit their understandings of fire feature form and function. As we were looking at photos of these features, Siksika Elder Herman Yellow Old Woman said (here I paraphrase slightly), 'I think I know what they are, but I can't tell you' (Herman Yellow Old Woman, personal communication 2023).

To those who have not spent significant time with Indigenous communities, one's initial reaction to Herman's comment might be to be taken aback that he could 'solve' this problem but was unwilling to share that information. The reality, though, is that Herman was not unwilling, but rather, I suspect, *unable* to share this knowledge. This is an extremely important distinction. Within Blackfoot culture, individuals have rights to certain knowledge based on a wide variety of factors, including their membership in societies, participation in ceremony or other roles within the community, for example. In some cases, knowledge is public, while in others, this knowledge can only be shared with or by those who have the rights to it (Bastien, 2004; LaPier, 2017). As someone who has been and is actively involved in traditional ceremonial life, Herman has rights to knowledge that I, as non-Indigenous scholar, and potentially other Blackfoot individuals in the room that day, do not have rights to. Further, it might be that this is knowledge Herman has obtained through his own practice that he may not have the right to share. In either case, this would not be public knowledge, and for Herman to share it would not only violate cultural protocol but even be dangerous (see, for example, Bastien 2004). As everyone in the room recognized this fact, the conversation simply moved on.

In such a situation, braiding knowledge to bring together archaeological data and oral tradition would not

only be impossible but also unethical. To ask Herman (or another individual) to share cultural knowledge which I have no right to know is entirely inappropriate and is dangerous for both myself and that individual. At the same time, as the conversation progressed that day, members of our Elders advisory group noted that it would be useful to have a Master's student produce a thesis which provided, summarized and interpreted all of the archaeological knowledge pertinent to these atypical fire features. Unlike the knowledge held by Herman, which is grounded in traditional Blackfoot life, they recognized that this technical archaeological knowledge was not accessible within the community and felt that it would be beneficial to have such a study completed. Members of the community could then bring that archaeological information together with their own cultural knowledge in an appropriate way. By approaching a project this way, archaeologists become facilitators of knowledge construction within communities but may not have oral traditions shared with them or be able to bring these two knowledge systems together in their own research.

Reflecting on this and other experiences, teachings I have received from colleagues, Elders and Knowledge Holders and my own previous work has led me to several questions. I am privileged to have had the opportunity to learn about and experience Blackfoot culture and to attend ceremony and learn from Elders and Knowledge Holders on numerous occasions. I am not, however, Blackfoot and will always have an outsider's perspective on this community and their traditional practices. I wonder, then, if I can ever truly privilege Western science and traditional knowledge equally, given my own positionality? The answer is undoubtedly that I cannot. Likewise, is it even ethical to try to braid together scientific and cultural knowledge when my community partners or I may or may not have proper rights to that knowledge or to share it? Further to this, is braiding knowledge truly possible, or are these contrasting perspectives destined to collide as jagged worldviews (see Little Bear 2000)? Finally, is there even a point in weaving knowledge if we stop to listen to the needs of the community?

Discussion: How can I help?

Numerous scholars have noted that the concept of decolonization has flaws, arguing decolonization is not possible until we acknowledge colonization as an ongoing reality and until settler scholars are willing to engage in this decolonization in a substantive and structural way (Atalay 2006; Lightfoot 2008; Tuck/Yang 2012; Supernant/Warrick 2014; Todd 2016). While my attempts to braid knowledge in my dissertation stemmed from a desire to include Indigenous knowledge in archaeological research, they demonstrate an incomplete understanding of the task at hand and may reflect a premature attempt at reconciliation (i.e., Tuck/Yang 2012, 9). Though well-intentioned, it is nevertheless true that:

> *'When anthropologists and other assembled social scientists sashay in and start cherry-picking parts of Indigenous thought that appeal to them without engaging directly in (or unambiguously acknowledging) the political situation, agency, legal orders and relationality of both Indigenous people and scholars, we immediately become complicit in colonial violence.' (Todd 2016, 18)*

As noted by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), Zoe Todd (2016) and others, as Canadians and North Americans, we live in a settler-colonial state and must recognize that this pervades everything we do. At the same time, my own experiences have grounded my perspective in a way that recognizes the inherent relationships that descendant communities, such as the Siksika, have with the land and their ancestors, and I am committed to working to do archaeology differently. I strive for an archaeological practice which serves the communities of the friends and colleagues who have been so kind to share their time and teachings with me. This leads me to question my role in the era of Canadian Truth and Reconciliation[1] (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). As a non-Indigenous archaeologist, what right do I have to access knowledge? Further, what knowledge do I have the right to share?

So, what now? While I have spilled considerable ink in this paper demonstrating where I see flaws in how we have at times applied models of braiding knowledge, this concept nevertheless has significant value and can be gainfully applied in some circumstances. The work of Maria Nieves Zedeño and Francis Lanoë with the Blackfeet in Montana

1 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada was created with a mandate to inform all Canadians about what happened in residential schools. Between 2007 and 2015, the TRC documented the truth of those affected by the residential school experience. This mandate concluded in 2015 with the publication of a final report, in which the TRC provided 94 Calls to Action to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of reconciliation in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).

is an excellent example of how braiding knowledge in archaeology can be applied in a way that is guided by and of benefit to descendant communities (e.g., Lanoë et al. 2020; Zedeño et al. 2021). Through this partnership between the University of Arizona and the Blackfeet Reservation, recent research has, for example, examined the McKean Phase in the Rocky Mountain Front and how the archaeological record of the Middle Archaic may reflect the emergence of social identity (Lanoë et al. 2020). Additionally, it has explored how Blackfoot oral traditions of the Rocky Mountain Front complement fragmentary records of early human presence in the region (Zedeño et al. 2021). In these successful studies, archaeologists serve as facilitators, contributing their archaeological expertise to research objectives defined and led by the community – questions for which traditional knowledge already provides valuable insights. In other cases, though, I fear that a push to braid knowledge or weave together worldviews may simply create a demand for knowledge to which an individual scholar holds no rights.

I have certainly experienced situations myself where braiding knowledge comes together beautifully, with information provided by Elders enriching our understanding of the archaeological record, allowing these two lines of evidence weave together harmoniously. That is a topic for different paper, if and when the Siksika community decides they are ready to share. The reality, however – as highlighted by my anecdote about Herman and the fire features we excavated – is that this concept works only in certain circumstances. Instead of treating braiding knowledge as a one-size-fits-all approach:

> *'If our goal is to decolonize archaeology, we must then continue to explore ways to create an ethical and socially just practice of archaeological research — one that is in synch with and contributes to the goals, aims, hopes, and curiosities of the communities whose past and heritage are under study, using methods and practices that are harmonious with their own worldviews, traditional knowledges, and lifeways.' (Atalay 2006, 284)*

The first step in achieving this goal is to truly stop and listen, recognizing the differential positions of power and privilege at any table. When I first started to work with the Siksika Nation, this was one of the hardest things to wrap my head around — I am sure, at times, to the consternation of my Siksika colleagues. In my own family, we constantly talk over and interrupt one another to ensure our own ideas are heard. In my partnership with the Siksika, I needed to learn to stop, listen, understand, reflect and then speak. I believed that braiding knowledge was the way forward, and, early on, I suspect I may have pushed this agenda. I needed to recognize my own privilege and to learn to allow for the empty space that creates an opportunity for the community and my Siksika colleagues to form their own ideas and chart a path forward. I needed to learn to listen not only to my colleagues' thoughts on my suggestions but also to their goals, concerns, and what they feel can benefit their community. Only after listening to and reflecting on all this information should I begin offering suggestions on how to apply my technical expertise to meet these goals, positioning myself as a facilitator of community-led research.

Engaging with the community early in the research process, before objectives have been defined, is one of the core tenets of community-based research (Strand et al. 2003; Atalay 2012; Duke 2020). Community-based research, where community members actively engage and collaborate with researchers in all aspects of a research programme (Duke 2020), differs from what we often refer to as capital-C Consultation. As aptly stated by Silliman (2008, 7), 'Consultation involves legal mandates, procedural steps and compliance, whereas collaboration emphasizes social relationships, joint decision-making, equitable communication, mutual respect and ethics.' Many authors have similarly noted that for Indigenous archaeologies or the decolonization of our work to be successful, it must be grounded in community partnerships based on respect (Watkins 2005; Atalay 2012; Supernant 2018; Simons et al. 2021; Amundsen-Meyer/Ayoungman 2024). This respect, and the resulting multivocality, is foundational. Without it, we cannot move beyond an archaeology rooted in settler-colonialism.

To make archaeology a truly collaborative endeavour, we must first address settler-colonialism and its differential power dynamics, identify the transformations that are needed in North American archaeology and fully commit to these transformations (Lightfoot 2008). Our ability to do so will come from community-based research and from taking the time to stop, listen and reflect on our own practice. This is the way forward. To successfully apply community-based research strategies within an Indigenous archaeological paradigm, I believe there are two necessary preconditions. First, it is the responsibility of the researcher to educate themselves on Indigenous worldviews, histories and current realities prior to entering into

any relationship with an Indigenous community. Without intercultural competency as a foundation, I fear that any community relationship one enters will simply perpetuate ongoing settler-colonialism. Secondly, any community-based research with Indigenous communities (arguably with any community) needs to be grounded in culturally specific understandings. Within Canada alone, there are more than 600 First Nations communities, representing over 50 Nations (Government of Canada 2023). 45 First Nations reside in what is now the province of Alberta (Government of Canada 2022). This does not yet even consider or include the many Inuit and Métis communities here (Government of Canada 2023). While these communities certainly share some values and aspects of their worldviews may overlap, each has its own distinct culture, practices and goals. As we engage in community-based research, we must avoid pan-Indianism and be culturally specific in our work with descendant communities.

Considering the plethora of approaches within the paradigm of Indigenous archaeologies and the large number of descendant communities present in Canada alone, I agree with Alison Wylie (2002, 246) that '… there are no simple, generalizable answers to questions about how archaeologists should proceed.' In my opinion, the best approach is to build relationships and simply ask, 'How can I help?' In asking this question, we need to be open-minded and prepared for the answer to be different what we expect or desire. In my own case, I needed to learn to stop and listen before I could recognize that braiding knowledge may not, in all cases, be desired by or beneficial to the descendant communities with whom I work.

Additionally, we need to hear and reflect on community concerns about the work to ensure that, first and foremost, we do no harm. Kisha Supernant and Gary Warrick (2014, 565) importantly point that:

> *'Collaborative archaeology has great potential to make positive contributions to the lives of contemporary community members and to archaeology as a discipline and practice. However, we must account for the fact that archaeology working in neo-colonial context also has the possibility to do harm.'*

Archaeologists in North America (and much of the world today) continue to work within a settler-colonial state; colonialism is an ongoing process (Tuck/Yang 2012; Todd 2016). In this context, archaeological interpretations of the past may inadvertently promote the rights of one descendant community over another or create rifts within a community between those with different views on how archaeology should proceed or different understandings of appropriate cultural protocols, for example (i.e., Supernant/Warrick 2014). We must be aware of and guard against these possibilities.

As an educator and archaeologist, I believe I have a responsibility to impart the importance of the connection between descendant communities and the archaeological record in my students and to ground their practice of archaeology in a way that recognizes the importance of this connection. While fully engaging with communities during a two- to four-year graduate program is impossible, it is critical that, as a supervisor, I recognize issues, encourage best practices and prepare my students for what can be the bumpy ride of practicing Indigenous archaeologies. One of my graduate students may, in future, undertake the technical study of atypical fire features that our Elders advisory group asked for that day. When I propose this technical study of fire features as a thesis project, I often hear the concern that it would be grounded solely in Western science and fail to incorporate Indigenous worldviews, ontologies and epistemologies. It certainly would not braid together archaeological and cultural knowledge. From the outside, then, this thesis could be seen as yet another colonial endeavour that fails to consider or include the descendant community(ies). The reality, however, is that this thesis topic results from community-based research within a framework of Indigenous archaeologies and uses archaeology to facilitate and advance community objectives. It is what the community asked for.

Conclusion: Moving forward

As archaeologists in the era of Truth and Reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015), it is our responsibility to work to decolonize archaeological epistemology and to create ethical and reciprocal research relationships which are built on and inclusive of Indigenous histories, worldviews and current realities. Most archaeology in Canada today is still conducted by primarily white, settler archaeologists, despite the fact that the majority of archaeological sites are remnants of the Indigenous past. Therefore, to create ethical and meaningful research and teaching environments, we must engage with descendant communities regarding both the past and present of these communities.

Supernant and Warrick (2014, 583) ask, 'whether archaeology is or ever will be fully decolonized or post-colonial in a neo-colonial world.' Certainly, archaeology today has taken limited, but important, strides towards decolonization. Ultimately, my practice of archaeology still occurs within a settler-colonial state. To move beyond this, we must reflect on our knowledge and practice and work towards a community-based research model grounded in meaningful, respectful partnerships with descendant communities. In fact, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) defined reconciliation as an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). Specifically, the TRC calls on us to renew or establish Treaty relationships based on principles of recognition, mutual respect and shared responsibility for maintaining those relationships into the future (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015, Call to Action 45iii; see also Hildebrandt et al. 1996).

In my own work, I have often expressed a desire to build the capacity of Indigenous communities to do archaeological work themselves (Amundsen-Meyer et al. 2023). Perhaps it is time to flip that concept and instead consider that 'Indigenous communities have long had to build capacity among settler scholars so we can function as trustworthy partners and witnesses' (Simons et al. 2021, 5). As archaeologists, we must become witnesses and allies with Indigenous peoples, as decolonization of archaeology cannot occur without decolonization of society as a whole (Wobst 2005; Tuck/Yang 2012; Supernant/Warrick 2014).

The Anti Opression Network (2021) defines allyship as 'the active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group.' Further, in their *Treaty 7 Indigenous Ally Toolkit,* the Calgary Foundation (2019) states:

> *'An ally acknowledges that building relationships between Indigenous and non-indigenous people is a work of the heart. It requires a certain humbling to allow our hearts and minds to accept new, and often challenging, information.'*

Over the last decade, I have pushed myself to work beyond my comfort zone, to listen, to reflect and to use my own privilege to advocate for change in processes and structures which affect the descendant communities with which I work. There have certainly been times when this has been difficult. At these times, I wonder: if it feels hard for me, who has a position of privilege, how must it feel for my Siksika colleagues and friends? This question drives me forward and pushes me to use my voice of privilege to speak out (Supernant/Warrick 2014). In the future, I will continue to show up with an open heart, open mind and open ears and ask, 'How can I help?'

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