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Archaeology as Grounding: Decentring, Detaching and Decolonizing in the Service of Communities

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Abstract

Collaborative archaeologies have transformed relations between archaeologists and descendant communities, yet their most consequential effects remain undertheorized. We argue that such collaborations constitute a form of grounding for both standpoints – whether descendant or archaeologist. Drawing on cases from the Northwest Coast of North America, we show how collaborative archaeological practice reconnects Indigenous peoples with ancestral belongings and places in ways that support what Glen Coulthard and Leanne Simpson call 'grounded normativity' – the embodied, land-connected ethical lifeways that colonialism has sought to sever. We extend the concept of 'archaeology as therapy' by demonstrating that therapeutic effects arise from this grounding: the restoration of reciprocal relations between living communities and their heritage. We maintain that meaningful collaboration requires an inverse movement for archaeologists – not attachment, but detachment from colonial-derived frameworks of site ownership, scientific authority and possessive control over heritage that originates with the ancestors of descendant peoples. Decentring archaeology means recognizing the archaeological 'site' itself as a colonial construct – one that severs belonging from the places and people descendant from that heritage. Practiced with genuine commitments to community sovereignty, archaeology can ground itself in right relations and better serve the peoples to whom the heritage belongs.

Keywords:
collaborative archaeology, decolonization, grounded normativity, archaeology as therapy, Northwest Coast, heritage

Introduction

In recent decades, collaborations between archaeologists and descendant communities have become increasingly common, a development that undoubtedly benefited the discipline. These collaborations represent a form of praxis that establishes new protocols and practices, broadens the scope of understandings of the sites under investigation and strengthens relations between archaeologists and the descendant communities whose heritage is being studied. With these practices now established for some time, we can begin to consider subsequent developments that have arisen as unforeseen consequences of collaborations.

Collaborations encourage a self-reflexive praxis, prompting archaeologists to recognize long-standing underpinnings and core methodologies in the field. Such reflexivity can positively shape our understanding and approach to archaeology, producing approaches less en-

cumbered with colonial weight. The process of decolonization in archaeology, and the enhancement of meaning it generates, can itself provide a foundation for positive relations not only with ancestral communities but also among practitioners themselves. In so doing, archaeology can be metaphorically grounding, better situating archaeologists alongside collaborators and the broader public concerned with archaeological heritage. This is the focus of our essay.

Collaborations can have greater effects than what may be immediately apparent as an ethical or decolonial practice, or as a practice that expands our interpretive understandings. Rather, collaborations can lead to transformative results for all parties. That is, collaborative practices can provide archaeologists with a better understanding of local community needs and how their disciplinary aims intersect with them.

In prior work, we highlighted how archaeological collaborations can be quite meaningful for Indigenous participants (Schaepe et al. 2017). In several cases, individuals reported that, by engaging in archaeological fieldwork, the practice allowed deeper engagements with the material heritage or the dwellings of their ancestors. Some stated that it was personally impactful to handle the 'belongings' of their ancestors during excavations. Even the word or concept of 'belongings' revealed that descendant communities expressed an attachment – a connection, a sense of relation – to the items recovered in these investigations. These were not artefacts abstracted and objectified as entities unto themselves, as an *artefact-in-itself*, akin to the Kantian *thing-in-itself* – something that is not truly knowable and a realm apart. Rather, these were brought into relation through the notions of a 'belonging' or 'heirloom,' through concepts that maintained a relation between ancestor and descendant through the material entity. Through collaborations, new concepts were brought to bear that retooled archaeological perspectives on archaeological remains.

For us, this was an unexpected outcome of these collaborative archaeological projects, as the aims generally were to carry out the normal practice of archaeological research, albeit with the participation of members from the descendant community. As archaeologists, we had considered these collaborations primarily as an ethical practice, and that community involvement would improve the scope of our research questions and interpretations. Yet, it turned out to have greater results than that. Some Indigenous participants described the experiences as transformative for their conceptions of themselves and for how they related to their traditions and cultural materials. For such reasons, we called this 'archaeology as therapy' (Schaepe et al. 2017).

We argued that archaeology can be a practice that serves to better connect Indigenous people with their traditional territory and the materiality of their ancestral remains, as connected through these belongings that tie descendants conceptually with their ancestors. In this way, archaeology, as such a practice, is well suited to facilitate a form of land-based pedagogy. As Matthew Wildcat and colleagues (2014, 1) argued:

> *If colonization is fundamentally about dispossessing Indigenous peoples from land, decolonization must involve forms of education that reconnect Indigenous peoples to land and the social relations, knowledges and languages that arise from the land.*

To this, we add that archaeology offers more than relationships to traditional territory, but also a way to engage with their material heritage. If connections to land can serve as a decolonial practice, then material connections to ancestral heritage can also help to decolonize relationships. Here, we mean this to be as therapeutic or grounding not only for Indigenous participants in archaeological excavations, but also for archaeologists (whether settler or Indigenous), who also need to decolonize their relations to archaeological heritage.

In what follows, we explore this dual transformation through the lens of what we call 'archaeology as grounding.' Drawing on Indigenous theories of 'grounded normativity,' we attempt to understand how collaborative archaeology can ground Indigenous peoples in their ancestral relations while simultaneously requiring archaeologists to ground themselves through detachment from colonial claims over heritage. This is not the same grounding: Indigenous peoples ground themselves through deepening attachment to the materials of their ancestors, asserting what rightfully belongs to them; archaeologists ground themselves in contemporary local realities and community relations, distancing themselves from colonial claims and detaching from what does not belong to them. Both processes, however, are grounded in principles of proper relations to heritage and have the potential to be therapeutic and transformative for all involved.

Grounded normativity for archaeological collaborations

Indigenous theorists have expressed the importance of grounding oneself in relations, which is opposed to the bounded and authoritarian character of colonial structures. Glen Sean Coulthard (2014, 13) developed the concept of 'grounded normativity,' which concerns:

> *the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time.*

Coulthard details an Indigenous orientation to land based in traditional principles of reciprocal relations. In so doing, Coulthard reframes the land itself – not as a territory that can be claimed (or resources, including archaeological, that can be extracted) – rather as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations to other entities in association with it, whether plants, animals, forests, water bodies, mountains or ancestors. Coulthard (2014) generated this concept, drawing on his own experience as Yellowknives Dene of Northwest Canada, but also from engagement with political theorists in decolonization.[1] In this way, Coulthard forefronts an Indigenous vantage-point on political theory about colonial structures, in which he argued that First Nations should reject the 'politics of recognition,' whereby an Indigenous nation seeks their sovereignty through the recognition of the settler colonial state. Rather, he maintains that Indigenous sovereignty is enacted through land-based practices and grounded normativity – not granted by settler states – and that this should structure how Indigenous peoples relate to others and orient their political struggles. His arguments have substantial implications for us here regarding their control of heritage within Indigenous territories as well as considering archaeology as a form of land-based pedagogy.

In the Anishnaabe region of central North America, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017, 17–18) has applied Coulthard's notion of grounded normativity. She states that Indigenous peoples maintain ongoing practices of creating and recreating Indigenous lifeways through engagement with places, territories saturated with practices of their ancestors and their relations with non-humans. She refers to grounded normativity as synonymous with her own culture's concept of *nishnaabewin*, which are a form of ethics that derive from their generational knowledge and practices conducted within their traditional territories (Simpson 2017, 22). These are not static, however, but adapt appropriately as one does with the seasons or the decades:

> *Nishnaabeg political systems begin in individuals and our relationships to the implicate order or the spiritual world. The ethics and values that individuals use to make decisions in their personal lives are the same ethics and values that families, communities, and nations use to make decisions about how to live collectively. Our ethical intelligence is ongoing; it is not a series of teachings or laws or protocols; it is a series of practices that are adaptable and to some degree fluid.... [It is] a series of complex, interconnected cycling processes that make up a nonlinear, overlapping emergent and responsive network of relationships of deep reciprocity, intimate and global interconnection and interdependence, that spirals across time and space.*
>
> *(Simpson 2017, 24)*

Together, both scholars discuss how this concept applies not only to their own cultures but to non-human entities as well as those with whom they share space:

> *Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner. Grounded normativity teaches us how to be in respectful diplomatic relationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations with whom we may share territorial responsibilities or common political or economic interests. Our relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which* ***we practice solidarity****.*
> *(Coulthard/Simpson 2016, 254, emphasis original)*

1 The title of his main book, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Coulthard (2014), echoes the work of Frantz Fanon (2007 [1963]; 2008 [1952]) on decolonization, as Fanon emphasized the need for the construction of new relations that avoid colonial and authoritarian forms (Coulthard 2014, 148). He also emphasized Karl Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation' as concretely tying capital to colonialism. Further, he highlights anarchist theory as important for Indigenous peoples in providing decolonial practices, such as direct action, prefiguration and non-state-based relations. As Maia Ramnath (2011) has argued, for a theory of decolonialism, the most elaborate body of theory is anarchism, as it is explicitly about creating non-coercive or non-authoritarian social structures. For this reason, several Indigenous scholars have explored anarchism as relevant to Indigenous theory (Alfred 1999; Dupuis-Déri/Hill 2023).

As a concept about grounding ourselves in relations connected to place, the relevance for archaeological praxis becomes apparent. We, as archaeologists, conduct our work within the traditional territories of descendant peoples, and we investigate and excavate heritage that has been deposited as part of practices based on traditional knowledge. We often encounter the remnants of their offerings and relations with other humans and non-humans. The stratigraphy of such places reveals how these are part of the layers that have formed the ground beneath our feet, and into which we excavate.

For a connection with archaeological approaches, Chris Fowler (2004, 4) has argued that archaeologists need to interpret assemblages of artefacts, features or burials as embodied in networks of relationships – relations that are 'attained and maintained … not only with human beings but with things, places, animals and spiritual features of the cosmos.' This approach to personhood as distributed through relationships with material culture and places provides additional theoretical grounding for how collaborative archaeologies can support Indigenous grounded normativity. He emphasizes that we should consider archaeological assemblages properly as a web of relations. When descendant peoples describe archaeological materials as 'belongings' rather than 'artefacts,' they are asserting inalienable relationships with their ancestors through and with material culture – for Fowler, these relationships constitute personhood itself. Archaeological places are not merely locations of past activity but nodes in ongoing relational networks, not only in the past (as Fowler maintains) but also in the present (as Coulthard and Simpson have argued).

Grounded normativity stands in contrast to archaeological abstractions that sever material culture from living relationships. Where conventional archaeology has treated the 'artefact' and 'site' as bounded objects – pockets of a past disconnected from the present – grounded normativity recognizes these as *belongings* and *places* embedded in ongoing networks of reciprocal obligation between the living and their ancestors. The notion of 'belongings' itself expresses this relational grounding, incorporating subjectivity with the item and maintaining connection rather than severing relations through objectification. Archaeology practiced collaboratively can restore such material connections for descendant peoples, providing a way of grounding oneself in traditions and ancestors – and thus a way of decolonizing settler narratives that have severed these relations.

Yet, if collaborative archaeology can support Indigenous grounded normativity by facilitating connections to ancestral places and belongings, what does this require of archaeologists? We argue that it demands a fundamentally different kind of grounding – not through attachment to Indigenous heritage, but through recognition of colonial frameworks and detachment from possessive claims from the colonial state or of expertise. This dual grounding – attachment for Indigenous communities, detachment for archaeologists – forms the theoretical core of what we explore here as 'archaeology as grounding.'

Archaeological 'site' as colonial construct

To understand what detachment means for archaeologists, we must examine one of archaeology's most fundamental concepts: the 'site.' We challenge a core notion of archaeology and its longstanding relationship to the places of Indigenous peoples' ancestral material heritage – commonly referred to as the archaeological 'site.' This phrasing connotes bounded locales for study by those who study the past; i.e., archaeologists. Seen in this light, Lewis Binford's (1962, 101) statement about 'the entire span of culture history as our "laboratory"' reveals this positioning of the heritage of other peoples as existing for archaeologists to examine. The terminology also involves a claim. We echo challenges that have been made to the inherent colonial-based claim of ownership and control over archaeological sites by altering the field of relations to such places and decolonizing our Western attachment (Smith/Wobst 2005a, 5–12; Atalay 2006, 282–283).

Just as 'belonging' indicates an ancestral attachment to archaeological heritage on the part of descendant peoples, the word 'site' operates in a similar manner, as a casting of attachment – a claim upon a bounded location and its material remnants of human activity. With 'site,' on the part of archaeologists, such a word is generally stated from the standpoint of expertise and mastery – indeed, the word is given stricter meanings within the jargon of the discipline than in common usage. While 'belonging' is a more open claim, subject to the witnessing by others, the usage of 'site' is framed through supposed objectivity, a mask that hides a claim of attachment and control.

The 'site' is initially defined scientifically within archaeological terms; subsequently, 'site' is applied within heritage frameworks, wherein a bounded locale is 'registered.' The word 'site' is applied first as science, then as law. The locale is thus subjected to permitting processes

that determine who may investigate the place, as maintained by the state. In the past, states have enacted differential treatments of archaeological heritage, depending upon whose heritage it is. The point is that, beyond a claim over sites, state control over heritage can lead to differential treatment of such places. Hence, our emphasis here on a standpoint of detachment towards ancestral places for archaeologists as a decolonial emphasis.

Concerning the heritage of Navajo territory, Ora Marek-Martinez (2021, 506) has stated that:

> *our culture was and is the cultural landscape. Cultural knowledge and cultural practices are embedded in everything; they create the protocols that guide the work that is completed with, by, and for the community.*

She connects how cultural knowledge is part of the landscape itself, as cultural features and the artefacts or belongings that have contributed to the formation processes of the territorial landscape. She further addresses how archaeology can serve as a politics of refusal, denying colonial and state-based separations of culture and land.[2] For archaeologists, aiding or enacting such refusals requires an examination of our own claims to ancestral or historical places.

Inverting forms of attachment to heritage

If 'site' has connotations of state-based heritage claims, we advocate that, for archaeologists, detachment is the foundation of a more meaningful future for a renewed archaeological practice and paradigm. Previously, we proposed that increased attachment is the basis of improved well-being and therapeutic practice for Indigenous communities engaged in archaeological work on ancestral places. Here, we suggest an inverse relationship for the field of archaeology, involving detachment from such places recognized as archaeological sites, as a result of colonial principles and doctrines (e.g., Doctrine of Discovery; the legal fiction of *terra nullius*) that legitimated such claims in the first place, without consultation with the peoples whose heritage it is.

This inversion is key, and it affects the core of relations between archaeological practitioners and their places of practice around the world. Where Indigenous peoples benefit from grounding through attachment – reconnecting with ancestral belongings and places through their own ethical frameworks of reciprocal obligation – archaeologists must detach themselves from the reified abstractions that enable possessive claims and inhibit Indigenous relationships to their heritage. By rejecting the inherent linkage between archaeological practice and place-based ownership, we detach ourselves as archaeologists from colonial-founded ownership, possession or control of material culture. In this way, the site designation operates as a form of eminent domain (derives from *dominium eminens* [*tr.* supreme ownership]), a claim by a state that allows the expropriation of property for its own aims. Unless there are arrangements with descendant groups otherwise, the site designation can make such areas off-limits or subject to state control. This is similar historically to processes whereby the designations of 'natural parks' can preclude the continuation of traditional activities within such areas, or the expropriation of traditional territory (even reserve lands) for development projects.

A fundamental change in our understanding of who we are in archaeological relationships can occur if we are attentive to how we apply our disciplinary tools. This altered recognition can lead to an increase in well-being, not just for the individuals involved, but for broader collective relations and collaborations. This decentring of our stance can help decolonize not just our practices as archaeologists, but also our perspectives on our practices, interpretations and relationships, by better recognizing our own situatedness within existing political structures of relations.

Archaeology as therapy – An outgrowth of collaborative archaeologies

Such decentring does not emerge from theory alone – it has been practiced, often before it was theorized, through decades of collaborative and Indigenous archaeologies. Early interventions transformed archaeology through collaborative practice with descendant communities (LaRoche/Blakey 1997; Moser et al. 2002), while critical examinations of archaeology's colonial legacies called for the fundamental decolonization of the discipline (McNiven/Russell 2005; Smith/Wobst 2005b; Atalay 2006). These theoretical foundations were developed through numerous studies that brought together Indigenous voices and established new frameworks for teaching and learning (Silliman 2008; Lyons 2013), as well as through explicit articulations of collaborative archaeology's theory, principles and practice (Nich-

2 This politics of refusal, Marek-Martinez (2021) adopts from Audra Simpson's (2014) work. This approach echoes other archaeological approaches similarly concerned with archaeology and refusal, such as by Yannis Hamilakis (2025) or Uzma Z. Rizvi (2025).

olas et al. 2011; Atalay et al. 2014; Martindale/Lyons 2014). Particularly significant has been scholarship by Indigenous archaeologists themselves, who have demonstrated how Indigenous methodologies can reshape archaeological practice in specific places (Watkins 2001; Yellowhorn 2002; Atalay 2006; 2007; Bruchac et al. 2010). Others have explored theoretical insights from collaborative partnerships (Cipolla et al. 2019), connected collaboration to anarchist principles of non-hierarchical practice (Gonzalez-Tennant 2018) and examined how collaboration disrupts archaeological dominance (Brown 2024). For such reasons, Patricia A. McAnany and Sarah M. Rowe (2015) have referred to collaborative archaeology as a paradigm shift for the discipline. As Lindsay M. Montgomery and Tiffany C. Fryer (2023) proclaimed, 'the future of archaeology is (still) community collaboration.'

It is within this disciplinary context of expanding collaborative practices that further potentials of archaeology have been set in motion – potentials that may not otherwise have been encountered. Collaborations can improve our results, more than just through excavation findings and our interpretations. In our previous study, we engaged in archaeological projects in collaboration with Indigenous groups (Schaepe et al. 2017). In our conversations, we noticed that we shared similar observations about the potential of archaeology extending beyond the benefits of collaboration alone, as we discuss below. We observed that these excavations had unexpected outcomes, proving mentally beneficial for some community members and offering therapeutic effects. We combined our reflections with those of David Snook, a mental health clinician working with Indigenous youth, to develop this line of research.

For one of us (Bill Angelbeck), this line of thinking emerged through discussions with archaeological crewmembers. On one project, Leonard Wells, a Semiahmoo Coast Salish artist, frequently worked as an archaeologist representing his community on cultural resource management (CRM) crews –a common practice in British Columbia (B.C.) for more than 20 years when projects take place within the traditional territory of a First Nation. In addition to archaeological work, Wells carved totemic poles for various parks and city monuments throughout the Vancouver region, especially in the city of Surrey, adjacent to Semiahmoo reserve.[3] In an interview, when asked how long he had been an artist and how he had started, he explained that for much of his early life, he had little interest in his traditional culture. Wells stated that his interest began through archaeological fieldwork:

> *[How did I become] a carver? Going back through archaeology … [I have] been doing archaeology for the band for almost 20 years now. And reading some of the archaeology books is what got me interested in the carving, seeing the little carvings that they were finding in archaeology sites all around B.C.. I thought, 'hey, I can do some of that.' I just started doing it.*
>
> *(Leonard Wells in Cen'Alien n.d.)*

The fact that he was initially not very familiar with his culture is in large part a result of Canada's residential school system, in which Indigenous youth were forced to learn and adopt Western culture (in dress, action and thought – they were punished even for speaking their own language; Regan 2010; Niezen 2022).[4] For Wells, it was his involvement as a community participant in archaeological projects that led to this turning point in his life, connecting him with his traditional heritage. This is how he became a major carver in his community – through his involvement in archaeology at places within his traditional territory. With such examples in mind, we aimed to document other cases in which archaeology did more than simply recover information about the past.

In our previous study, we highlighted three such cases in the Coast Salish area: one concerning the repatriation of a stone sculpture to the Stó:lō, another involving recovery excavations at a Klallam ancestral village site, and a third focusing on a field school excavation conducted at a Tla'amin village site (Schaepe et al. 2017).

Stone T'xwelátse

This case concerns the repatriation of an 'archaeological sculpture' that had been taken from a Stó:lō village in 1892

3 Leonard Wells creates art in several mediums: monumental sculptures, masks, rattles, bowls and jewellery. He apprenticed with Haida artist Robert Davidson and has collaborated with Susan Point (Musqueam/Coast Salish). He has created several public artworks for the City of Surrey, including *Eagle and Salmon*, *Kw'enalien* and *Welcoming You*.

4 Now, archaeologists throughout Canada have been involved in ground-penetrating radar surveys of the grounds of residential schools in T'kemlups te Secwépemc First Nation, which garnered worldwide attention through the identification of the graves of approximately 215 Indigenous children (Montgomery/Supernant 2022; Westman et al. 2025). According to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, out of a total of 150,000 students who attended these schools over their operation, up to 6000 children died while attending them, often without deaths being reported to their parents. These institutions were in operation since 1894, initiated through an amendment to the 1876 *Indian Act*; the last residential school closed in 1996. Thus, these were operational for over a century but only entered broad public awareness in the past 20 years. A great loss of traditional knowledge resulted from such policies.

and eventually accessioned into the Burke Museum in Seattle, where it was assigned a catalogue number 'Object #152' (Schaepe/Campion 2007). For the Stó:lō, however, Stone T'xwelátse is a living being in stone form with whom they maintain relationships. He is a family member, not an object. He was transformed, not carved. He is an ancestor named T'xwelátse, transformed by Xexá:ls (the Transformers) in the distant past as part of the process of 'making the world right' (McHalsie et al. 2001). Knowing one's history is centrally important among the Stó:lō, and it is fundamental to understandings of self, identity, well-being and place within society (Suttles 1958; Archibald 2008; Carlson 2010; Schaepe et al. 2021).

Stó:lō members described the return of this figure as a 'homecoming,' and we discussed how it was often framed as a moment of healing for the community (Fig. 1). Once repatriated, T'xwelátse toured a number of ancestral communities and museums, including the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology and the Reach Gallery Museum in Abbotsford (T'xwelátse et al. 2012), before the family determined that he should be provided a home at the Stó:lō Resource Centre in B.C.. There, he continues his role as a teacher, participating in youth cultural education programmes at the Centre.

While Stone T'xwelátse was visiting his relatives within the Nooksack Tribe in Washington State, a young member of the extended family stated that, upon seeing Stone T'xwelátse back home for the first time in 114 years, he immediately realized that 'a hole in his heart' had been healed by the stone ancestor's return and presence in the community.

Tse-whit-zen

In Washington State, during the construction of a temporary graving dock in 2003, an intact Klallam village and cemetery was encountered – one that had not been properly identified during the original survey. Suddenly, the Klallam were faced with the excavation and removal of their dead. Before the project ended, the graves of 300 ancestors had been excavated. Klallam individuals were involved in the excavations. This was traumatic for many community members; some described hauntings by the spirits of their ancestral kin, as recounted by Colleen Boyd (2009) in her article 'You See Your Culture Coming Out of the Ground Like a Power.'

Figure 1: Stone T'xwelátse returning to Stó:lō Nation in October 2006, with a celebration at the Semá:th Longhouse. Photo: D. Campion.

While handling disturbed graves was a troubling experience for some, the excavation of houses and other ancient village features catalyzed cultural revitalization. Many Klallam individuals described working at the site as a life-changing experience that revitalized interest in culture and history while revealing connections between who they are now and their traditions of the past. One of the Klallam involved in the excavations, Teresa Sanders, shared:

> *I didn't know anything about our culture at all.... It started out as a job, but all these artifacts, that's all I think about anymore.... This is our link; this is how we find out we who were before.*
>
> *(Mapes 2009, 175–176)*

While the experience was traumatic, it was also transformative, revitalizing interest among many Klallam in their culture and history and revealing connections between present identities and past traditions.

Klehkwahnnohm

Dana Lepofsky and John Welch worked with Tla'amin First Nation leaders to create a community-based archaeology and heritage stewardship field school on band lands in British Columbia. This led to excavations in Klehkwahnnohm Bay in 2007, where John Louie, a counsellor at Tla'amin Community Health Services, regularly observed the investigations. Near the conclusion of the project, he offered thoughts on its future. Notably, he suggested that he would like to involve Tla'amin members struggling with addiction, crime or other challenges in future excavations. He offered this reason:

> *Seeing what you guys are digging up and being with you as you strip back the layers allows our kids to see that things have not always been the way they are. There, at Kleh Kwa Num [the Scuttle Bay site], you can still see all the bottles on the surface from the loggers who were there in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Some of these guys were from here [Tla'amin] and some were nonnative.... The bottles show they were drinking a lot.... [You archaeologists] have gone down into the layers of history, below the experience of most people alive today and certainly below what the kids know. You and the students [then] found artifacts from the early 1900s, including coins and a crucifix. These are tokens of economic and spiritual impositions that came with Europeans and the Canadian government. Just below that, not even a foot below the surface, we see you are finding lots and lots of salmon and herring bones and [sea] urchin spines. From there on down, going back probably thousands of years, the ground is full of the remains of good food and good relations among people and their human and nonhuman relatives. We have always known from our elders and our local history that this was and is a good place, a place of great abundance. But it is different to see it in the ground, to see our elders' words and our history proved.*
>
> *(John Louie quoted in Schaepe et al. 2017, 505–506)*

Louie's interpretation reveals how archaeological practice can facilitate a form of grounded normativity. By excavating through the layers of colonial accumulation – the material residues and archaeological evidence of colonial inflections upon the Tla'Amin place – to reach the deeper strata of their ancestral place. The exposed stratigraphy in the excavation become a literal and metaphorical process of grounding Tla'amin youth in their true history. John Louie viewed depositional site formation as a metaphor for historical and social formation processes, specifically in relation to Tla'amin identity. He believes that colonial processes have complicated Tla'amin senses of identity and community, obscuring their core identity. This process of exavation, carried out by archaeologists, allows Tla'amin youth to understand that their present reality is not the only one that has existed.

He explained to the archaeologists what they had recovered, but in a way they had not previously considered. For each of us, Louie's interpretation substantially broadened our view of what archaeology could accomplish, showing that the connections extend beyond archaeologists' interpretative link between material remains and descendant communities.

Other cases of archaeology as therapy

Each of these cases concerns reconnection between descendant groups and their ancestral items, described in terms of healing and renewed engagement with tradition. These cases demonstrate how collaborative archaeologies can lead to outcomes that differ significantly from their original intentions, which were primarily to collaborate in the archaeological process. While the intention was to decolonize archaeological practice, these results show

that such efforts can produce transformative effects for descendant communities as they engage with the materiality of the ancestral remains and the accumulated layers of history embedded in the archaeological record.

Other archaeologists have explored the therapeutic qualities of archaeology. Rachael Kiddey (2017, 193), in her investigations of homelessness in Britain, found that:

> *[a] surprising outcome to the Homeless Heritage project was the degree to which homeless colleagues themselves reported that involvement in the collaborative cultural heritage process was therapeutic. For the collaborators involved, actions taken since being involved in the project have been momentous and dramatic.*

Such results became the focus of her study, with participants reporting stronger senses of identity and social connectedness, as well as benefits from the educational aspects of the project (Kiddey 2017, 194). Others, such as Paul Everill and Karen Burnell (2022), have collected numerous studies exploring the therapeutic potential of archaeology, including several cases focusing on positive outcomes when working with military veterans. These projects demonstrate that archaeological practice can support veterans in transitioning to civilian life or, more broadly, contribute to improved mental health (Bennett 2022; Ulke 2022; Waters-Barham/Humphreys 2022).

Claire Smith and colleagues (2022) discuss their work in southern Australia, where their surveys involved Nagadjuri collaborators. In having historically been separated from their traditional territories, many Ngadjuri felt unable to effectively pass along their knowledge of the land and its heritage to youth. The surveys they conducted documented archaeological sites including camps, rock art panels, hunting blinds and more. These encounters provided an avenue for reconnection of Ngadjuri descendants with their territory and the heritage within it. They concluded that:

> *Archaeology can play a vital role in enhancing the social, emotional and economic wellbeing of Indigenous communities … by supporting self-determination, the re-acquisition of cultural knowledge and the assertion of traditional authority.*
>
> *(Smith et al. 2022, 134)*

Such studies show the increasing connection between therapeutic archaeologies and the growing body of work concerning the archaeologies of care (Supernant et al. 2020; Rizvi 2023; Hamilakis 2024).

Archaeology as grounding for archaeologists

The previous case studies reveal how archaeological investigations can be therapeutic as a practical engagement with places of heritage, whether for veterans or for descendant peoples – encounters we can view as grounding participants materially within relations with practices or their ancestors, enhancing grounded normativity.

Now, we consider how archaeological collaborations can be equally grounding for archaeologists themselves. More than reconfiguring the structure of relationships between archaeologists and descendant communities, such collaborations allow archaeologists to recognize their own ethnocentric biases, helping to decolonize not just our practices but also our perspectives on our practices, interpretations and relationships. It is essential to focus on the limitations of our own perspectives as archaeologists – to recognize that our outlooks are reshaped by our various standpoints (Harding 2004; Wylie 2004; Rolin 2009): as archaeologists, as settler descendants of early colonists, as members of state societies and so on.

Although much of collaborative archaeology discourse advocates its positive aspects, we can also learn from cases where collaborations encounter difficulties (McGuire 2008, 185; Angelbeck/Grier 2014). Through such experiences – whether misunderstandings about decision-making, unfamiliarity with cultural protocols or misalignment between archaeological and community priorities – archaeologists confront the limitations of their own perspectives. Such blind spots have arisen in our own work, yet rather than treating them only as errors, we have found them productive: corrections that expand our understanding and signal that the collaboration is working, requiring negotiation about how to move forward. More important than specific mistakes, however, is what collaborative practice reveals about fundamental differences between archaeological and Indigenous relationships to heritage.

Consider how Indigenous communities view heritage in ways distinct from provincial or federal government frameworks. For instance, among Salishan peoples, a descendant community may wish to conduct a ceremony at the site to protect the excavators beforehand, or that crew members should be protected with marks of red ochre, or that archaeological work should cease at a site by 3pm each day, as ancestral places should be quiet as evening approaches. Such practices – following cultural protocols regarding the material remains of their ancestors – are

important to implement and will vary from community to community. Learning about cultural protocols and their importance can open up one's understanding of how people relate to their heritage.

In British Columbia, as elsewhere, Indigenous communities generally view heritage in distinct ways from the perspective of the provincial government, which in B.C. outlines the processes of heritage management on 'Crown land' (Schaepe et al. 2020). As one example of this, Eric McLay and colleagues (2008) engaged in numerous interviews with Hul'qumi'num Coast Salish peoples concerning the management of cultural heritage to define Hul'qumi'num customary laws, identify problems in their enforcement and recommend legal reforms that would address their interests in protecting their heritage. They found that the protection of Hul'qumi'num archaeological heritage is an essential aspect of their cultural identity. Unlike Western perspectives that view archaeological sites as scientific sources of knowledge about the past (which is akin to other extractive industries withdrawing resources from their traditional territory), Hul'qumi'num culture perceives them as the resting place of family ancestors, and they maintain few distinctions between archaeological sites and cemeteries; both are the locales of the spirits of their ancestors. Therefore, disturbance of these sites is seen as a disruption to the continuity of relations between the living and dead, which are reciprocal in nature. They outline three primary customary laws that govern Hul'qumi'num people's approach to protecting their archaeological heritage (McLay et al. 2008, 198):

- Only persons with the inherited right and ritual knowledge may care for the remains of the deceased ancestors and their belongings;
- No one may physically disturb any land containing ancient human remains and their belongings;
- Persons must avoid physical contact with the spirits of the deceased, their skeletal remains, their belongings and their burial grounds.

These customary laws are based upon principles of respect and reciprocity between the living and ancestors. To contravene these customary laws and upset the balance between the world of the living and the world of the dead is to invite dire consequences for the living, whether in the form of bad luck, illness, paralysis or death (McLay et al. 2008, 198); the example of the Klallam case above exemplifies such responses (Boyd 2009). These reveal forms of reciprocal practices that help maintain relations between descendants and ancestors. Through collaborating with Indigenous or other descendant peoples, archaeologists can become better aware of beliefs, laws and protocols that are operative for local communities.

Switching from attachment to detachment

Archaeology has long claimed rights over heritage through disciplinary expertise and state-sanctioned permits. In British Columbia, 'the Crown' owns the land and controls access to archaeological investigations. While archaeologists consider themselves part of a scientific enterprise and/or the CRM industry, the discipline operates through permits and site registries that structure both cultural resource management and academic practice – heritage legislation that reinforces colonial authority over Indigenous peoples' ancestral places.

These archaeological claims rest on colonial legal frameworks. Robert J. Miller and colleagues (2010) track the Doctrine of Discovery from medieval canon law through papal bulls, creating juridical foundations for dispossessing non-Christians of sovereignty and property rights. This doctrine's precepts – positioning Indigenous peoples as 'lesser,' legitimating occupation of their lands, authorizing enslavement – became so deeply embedded in Western institutions (supporting Canada's *Indian Act* and the Indian Residential Schools programme) that they constitute what we may call a colonial habitus that pervades archaeology itself.

By rejecting the linkage between archaeological practice and colonial claims, we detach ourselves from colonial-founded claims. We displace ourselves from places and belongings that rightfully belong to descendant communities. This detachment from possessive claims allows archaeological practice to operate differently – not as expertise granted by colonial states, but as service offered to communities. Through this detachment from colonial positioning, archaeologists ground themselves in ethical practice. They can then support rather than obstruct Indigenous grounded normativity, offering archaeological methods and knowledge in service of Indigenous peoples' own relationships with ancestral places and belongings. As Larry J. Zimmerman (2013, 100) describes, this is 'letting go' of our claims as 'part of the process of archaeological ethical development in relation to collaboration with descendant—especially Indigenous—communities.'

Archaeology in the service of communities

The practice of service is an emerging concept in the field of archaeology (Chesson et al. 2019; Welch 2019; Herr et al. 2023). Sonya Atalay and colleagues (2014, 7) have advocated that archaeology needs to:

> *transcend the interests of professional archaeologists and advance something other than the welfare of academic departments or cultural resource management/archaeological resource management firms.*

Further, they state: 'What better reason for archaeology to exist than to meet the needs of people' (Atalay et al. 2014, 7). In one of the chapters of their volume, Lee Rains Clauss (2014) adds that archaeology can be a 'tool' to help others, not a science that is off-limits to others, or isolated within laboratories, as Binford's analogy implied, mentioned above. For this to occur, archaeology needs to transform from primarily an academic or heritage-management practice to an activist one; hence the title of their volume: *Transforming Archaeology*. They intend this in both senses of the term: that archaeologists must be active in transforming the way that the discipline conducts its practices, but also that engaging in such work can also transform archaeologists in the process. They write that it can lead to 'a transformation in the way *all* archaeologists think about and practice their crafts' (Atalay et al. 2014, 14), emphasis original). They provide commendable guidelines for the discipline. Sean Connaughton (2025, 117) makes a similar point regarding cultural resource management, in arguing for 'the restoration of *human* values within archaeology, which have at this point, largely been supplanted by economic values.' He asks instead what can be done to recentre human values in our applied archaeologies.

The Stó:lō Nation, for example, has since the 1990s maintained archaeologists on staff as part of their operations and efforts to take care of what belongs to them (McHalsie (Naxaxalhs'i) 2007; Schaepe 2007) and engage Crown governments in addressing issues of Indigenous rights and title and 'the land question' as actions against colonialism. Archaeologists working for Stó:lō Nation serve to implement the Stó:lō Heritage Policy and 'occupy the field' (Stó:lō Nation 2003). We offer that an archaeology as grounding is a way to meet this aim – as activism, as working to benefit communities in aiding in the bridging of relations between descendant peoples and the material heritage of their ancestors. In this way, we can provide help to transform archaeological practice in a way that provides a service to Indigenous or other descendant peoples, with the possibility of helping to transform their own relations to heritage and ancestral connections in ways consistent with enhancing grounded normativity. Furthermore, we echo the point that such practices can be transformative for archaeologists as well, in both practice and perspective. One of the main reasons collaborations have great potential to do so is through encouraging a reflexivity upon our practice.

Collaborative archaeology as a reflective practice

There are several ways in which a collaborative archaeology – as therapy, as grounding, as service – can be beneficial as a practice for archaeologists.

First, it is a dialogical practice, encouraging and welcoming discussions and negotiations with descendant communities and local groups. In itself, this extends the scope of archaeology beyond that of the archaeological discipline, which is an important beginning and opening up of our perspectives to interaction.

Second, it is a dialectical practice, or praxis (McGuire 2008, 51–55). This means that our theoretical perspectives or stances are subject to critique and reflection as our perspectives as archaeologists meet with the perspectives of descendant communities. Through such practices, we can better identify the limits of our perspectives, helping us to recognize where these should be expanded. In so doing, we can also see the contradictions within our perspectives that require rethinking or clarification. We can recognize the ethnocentric biases (those inherent to the Western-based archaeological discipline). This is especially significant for better recognizing power imbalances that require correction for better balance of authority.

Third, in this way, a reflective archaeology is one that aims for a more holistic perspective that extends beyond our limits, as Western-trained/raised archaeologists. As Tyson Yunkaporta (2020, 83) described for Aboriginal cultures of Australia, who engage in council-based forms of decision-making:

> *You cannot know any part, let alone the whole, without respect [for other perspectives].*
> *You cannot come to knowledge without it. Each part, each person, is dignified as an embodiment of the knowledge. Respect must be facilitated by custodians, but there is no outsider-imposed authority, no 'boss,' no 'dominion over.'*

In such a way, the inclusion of multiple perspectives aids in fleshing out the perspective on the archaeological record. To be holistic is to include those that have been previously excluded.

Fourth, these reflective practices help archaeologists remain grounded in the realities of descendant communities' needs and relationships with heritage. Rather than abstracting heritage into disciplinary concerns divorced from living people, collaborative practice keeps archaeological interpretation tethered to the land-connected practices and ethical frameworks that constitute Indigenous grounded normativity. Our archaeological perspectives are thus checked against – and improved by – Indigenous knowledge systems that have always recognized what archaeology is only now beginning to acknowledge: that heritage is not a bounded 'site' apart, but a set of ongoing relationships accumulating across time and space.

Lastly, those interactions can alter or even transform our initial perspectives, theoretical stances, and interpretations – particularly those that retain colonial assumptions – making collaborative archaeology therapeutic for archaeologists as well. In reviewing our interpretations within collaborative contexts, we can better recognize how our ideas resonate with descendant peoples, or where they fall short, keeping our thinking grounded in both archaeological realities and practical relevance for communities.

Conclusion

To *collaborate* is to enter into a *relationship* with others; as archaeologists, this means non-archaeologists, descendant peoples, local communities, museums, heritage societies and others. And relationships are not merely the identification of a link between two beings, entities or groups. Rather, relationships involve *reciprocity*, which entails an ongoing give-and-take on both sides of the relationship, structuring how it develops and proceeds. Instead of archaeologists having priority over heritage, it has long been time to turn the tables so that archaeologists can decentre their positions so as to be in service of descendant peoples, who have had their ancestral sites subject to the claims of control by colonial states. In so doing, archaeologists expand the scope of their concern to be more cognizant of the contexts in which we operate and inclusive of stakeholders that share in the concern of heritage and of the descendant peoples whose heritage it is. When the scope of archaeological concern is expanded, this opens up the space for increased reflexivity in our practices.

In the process of decolonization and collaboration – through dialogues over aims, methods, analyses, interpretations and curation – archaeological practice and its practitioners can work towards decolonial forms. Indigenous communities achieve grounding through reconnection with ancestral places and belongings, supporting their grounded normativity as described by Coulthard (2014) and Simpson (2017). Archaeologists achieve grounding through recognition of their colonial positioning and detachment from possessive claims, allowing them to work in ethical service of communities. Both forms of grounding can be therapeutic, promoting foundations of meaning, relevance, connection and wellbeing.

This is the essence of archaeology as grounding: creating conditions where Indigenous peoples can exercise grounded normativity – engaging with their heritage through their own ethical frameworks of reciprocal obligation – while archaeologists ground themselves in service rather than mastery. The point is a simple one, as Zimmerman (2017, 527) observed: '"Archaeology as Therapy" reminds us that doing collaborative archaeology may also turn out to be therapy for archaeologists.' We extend this insight: collaborative archaeology is grounding for all parties, although in different ways and toward different ends. For Indigenous peoples, it supports land-connected practices and the ongoing creation of lifeways. For archaeologists, it supports recognition of colonial positioning and transformation toward ethical practice and service. Together, these complementary processes of grounding point toward a decolonized archaeology – one that serves rather than claims, that supports rather than displaces, that recognizes Indigenous and/or descendant sovereignty over their heritage as the foundation of all archaeological work. While we find ourselves today dealing with the centuries-old (and still in-the-making) legacies of colonial structures, it is important to do what we can to decolonize the parts of the structures we work within, to create better relationships, not only between peoples today, but extending to those relations in the heritage of places we work within. As Stone T'xwelátse and T'xwelátse (Herb Joe) stated, 'We have to learn to live together in a good way' (T'xwelátse et al. 2012).

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