REPORT

RECRUITING AND FOSTERING INDIGENOUS ARCHAEOLOGISTS: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Sarah Simeonoff
University of Colorado Boulder, Department of Anthropology, 1350 Pleasant Street, Boulder, Colordao 80309;
sarah.simeonoff@colorado.edu

ABSTRACT

Archaeology is amid a sea change, wherein Indigenous people and perspectives are increasingly at the fore. This move centers collaborative research and knowledge co-production to create an increasingly inclusive discipline that honors the science and knowledge of Indigenous peoples. Despite this change and calls for increased recruitment of Indigenous people into the discipline, the proportion of Indigenous archaeologists in the field remains low. This essay argues that archaeology's focus on categorization (broadly, at the level of method and theory, and specifically of Indigenous people/Indigeneity) is a pinch point where potential Indigenous archaeologists are alienated or discouraged from pursuing the field. By centering my own experiences as an Indigenous and white archaeologist, this essay suggests deemphasizing identity categories and focusing instead on collaborative methodologies as a meaningful path forward to recruiting and retaining scholars embedded in community.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years, North American archaeology of Indigenous communities has increasingly reckoned with its history of colonial and othering research. This has resulted in an increased emphasis on three key interventions: (1) meaningful collaboration with descendant communities (Colwell 2016; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; Montgomery and Fryer 2023; Silliman 2008), (2) the incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing in research and analysis (Atalay 2012; Crellin et al. 2020; Laluk et al. 2022; Supernant et al. 2020), and (3) increased researchers diversity (Heath-Stout 2024; Nicholas 2010a; Silliman 2008). While each are critical to conducting meaningful archaeological research grounded in public good and rigorous methodologies, I argue they each hinge on the recruitment and maintenance of researchers of diverse backgrounds, community connections, and perspectives. Despite the increased calls for and movement towards collaboration with descendant communities, the field continues to struggle to actuate meaningful change on this front with regard to Indigenous people (*sensu* Montgomery and Fryer 2023). Using my experience as a white (Irish, French, Scandinavian) and Indigenous (Alutiiq/Sugpiaq) archaeologist with experience across archaeological sectors (i.e., cultural resource management, academia, and museums), I demonstrate that the pedagogical and theoretical emphasis on the categorization of people (in the past, present, and future) requires remediation to advance archaeological practice towards equity. By deemphasizing individual identity and instead orienting towards methodological advancements, the field can rigorously employ Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies and continue to diversify and retain archaeologists with varied positionalities.

THE ONGOING PROBLEM OF CATEGORIES

Archaeology has long had a categorization problem which, in many ways, is intractable. Indeed, the utility, application, and even the existence of archaeological categories and types has often been a subject of debate (Dunnell 1986; Ford and Steward 1954; Gorodzov 1933; Hill and Evans 1972; Rouse 1960; Spaulding 1953; Whittaker et al. 1998). Scholarship on new methodologies and theories on how to engage with and employ categories continues (e.g., Adams and Adams 1991; Fladd et al. 2021; Garrow 2012; Hanson et al. 2024; Pollock and Bernbeck 2010; Sadre-Orafai 2020), and categorization remains fundamental to both our understanding of the archaeological record and our ability to design and actuate research. Even at its most basic level, archaeology centers on defining loci of human activity in contrast to those without, identifying artifacts opposite nonartifacts, and the past as distinct from the present and future. In this way, categories are essential to archaeological inquiry and analysis; hence the use of categories is second nature to archaeologists.

Categories require a definition that remains constant—a requirement that is fraught and complex when applied to raw materials, tool types, and temporal assignments (see above), and when extended to people and culture groups, the issues multiply. Even as archaeology has sought to remedy its fraught past by encouraging the braiding of Indigenous and Western knowledges and promoting the use of Indigenous ontologies, it has often failed to negotiate the meaning of Indigeneity in a way befitting living, vibrant, diverse peoples. In seeking to validate and encourage Indigenous researchers in archaeology, some scholars have emphasized the importance of an emic, insider perspective to complement and extend the insights of etic researchers. The notion of emic and etic perspectives is rooted in linguistics and cultural anthropology (Harris 1976; Pike 1954) and has been used to characterize the oppositional and complementary perspectives of the objective outsider (etic) and the subjective insider (emic).

Critics have noted that this flattens the perspective and experiences of those researchers who "occupy the edge or margin, between multiple worlds and perspectives" (Beals et al. 2020:593) and, further, that it is overly simplistic to explain the nuances of research (e.g., Beals et al. 2020; Haakanson 2010; Olive 2014). Still, the emic/etic divide is a key factor (whether explicit or implicit) in defining and debating the nature and definition of Indigenous archaeology (Atalay 2010; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; McNiven 2016; Nicholas 2010b; Watkins 2000). In attempting to resolve the central tenets of Indigenous archaeology, definitions vary from archaeology done using Indigenous theoretical framings, perspectives, and ontologies (Silliman 2008; Zedeño et al. 2021), to work undertaken by Indigenous researchers in any area (Cruz 2024), to Indigenous researchers working within their own communities (Deloria 1997; Two Bears 2008). Thus, discussions about the essential nature of Indigenous archaeologies and archaeologists naturally, if injuriously, extend to discussions of identity. Once Indigeneity becomes an adjective (for ontologies, archaeologies, and individuals), it requires categorization by researchers. Defining "Indigenous archaeologist" as a category then moves from one centered on praxis to one centered on the categorization of Indigeneity itself. The definitions turn on another point entirely: What are Indigeneity's essential pieces? What counts as Indigenous knowledge? Is Indigenous knowledge constrained and defined by colonial interactions, such that only knowledge originating before contact with Euro-American colonizing forces can be deemed traditional? Is it knowledge without measurable input from other communities? What if those communities are also Indigenous?

More troubling—and an issue I believe even more pressing—is the extension of these conversations to the categorization of Indigenous researchers. If Indigeneity itself is a definition available for refinement by the academy, so too are the qualifications for Indigenous researchers. The question becomes: who does and who *should* count as an Indigenous archaeologist? The potential conditions to be met are myriad: tribal enrollment, village or regional shares, blood quantum, status as a knowledge bearer, language fluency, time spent in ancestral lands, outward perceptibility, and more. One reasonable (and perhaps the only legitimate) response to these questions is to cede the answers to Indigenous communities themselves, as sovereign nations in command of their knowledge and membership. Though this would be preferable, my experience in archaeology broadly and academia specifically have indicated instead that these categorizations and the resulting methods (i.e., recruitment, application of Indigenous knowledge, etc.) are often the subject of discussion and debate by non-Indigenous researchers. These discussions take place primarily informally in classrooms, hallways, meetings, and around drinks. Some have taken these positions to publications, typically through critiques of Indigenous archaeologies as unscientific (McGhee 2010;

Weiss and Springer 2020) or through attempts to more narrowly (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; Silliman 2008; Watkins 2000) or broadly (Nicholas 2010b) define the theoretical basis. Though many researchers involved in this discourse in publication are Indigenous (Atalay 2012; Laluk et al. 2022; Nicholas 2010a; Nicholas and Watkins 2024; Steeves 2015, 2021; Van Alst and Shield Chief Gover 2024; Watkins 2000), the still-low proportions of Indigenous archaeologists in the field means that the majority of those undertaking this discussion informally are non-Indigenous.

Many of these negotiations about the meaning of Indigeneity are well intentioned—stemming not from an intent to invalidate Indigenous archaeology but rather from a desire to emphasize tribal sovereignty and highlight the harms arising from external definitions and categorizations. In my experience, these discussions are often undertaken to emphasize the assertion that Indigenous people are the sole arbiters of Indigeneity. While this goal is laudable, the primary tactic I have seen employed is to offer potential definitions (e.g., blood quantum, growing up in community, etc.) as a pedagogical strategy. While surely not universal in archaeology (nor an issue confined to the discipline), I have seen students asked rhetorically to think critically about whether an Indigenous person who grew up separated from their community is Indigenous, what about someone who found out they were Indigenous from a DNA test? A paternity test? From my perspective, these discussions give the impression that Indigenous knowledge, identity, and membership is a topic available for debate by non-Indigenous researchers, even when the intended thesis is the opposite. Rather than offering students a definition to employ—that an Indigenous person is someone who identifies as one and is accepted by their community—students are asked to examine and apply their own biases about the topic. During my graduate career, I have often squirmed as I tally up the points of Indigeneity in my favor and those against.

This issue extends, of course, beyond the academy. In the U.S., the issue of who is permissibly Indigenous is fraught by a dominant culture that has long exercised its authority to categorize and selectively adopt Indigenous culture in order to index a cohesive American identity (Deloria 1997; Hurst Thomas 2001). The notion that Indigeneity is subject to authorization looms especially large in archaeology, even when the goal of those discussions is to point out the problematic nature of such categorization. When archaeologists seek to define, negotiate, and authorize (or deauthorize) Indigeneity, the results on the individual can be counterproductive to the ongoing goal of increasing diversity and equity in the discipline (Heath-Stout 2024; Mickel 2021; Montgomery and Fryer 2023). As an Indigenous and white archaeologist, I have frequently confronted this issue (and the related defense of my identity) while pursuing a community-engaged PhD with my community. In the following section, I will use personal experiences to illustrate the alienating effect of categories on Indigenous students and offer a path towards improvement.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF CATEGORIES

As I began my PhD, the only concrete ideas I had about my dissertation topic were that it would be focused on the Kodiak Archipelago, centered on Alutiiq people, and done in collaboration with the community. At the time, these guiding principles felt simple. I had done work and been in contact with archaeologists at the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository (Alutiiq Museum), a museum at the forefront of Alutiiq archaeology and community work (West, this volume). I had connections with some community members (even if they were primarily my family), and I was outfitted with the knowledge that I am Alutiiq. That felt like firm footing for a project until I began interacting with the literature on Indigenous archaeologies, ontologies, and epistemologies and learned that none of these things—Indigeneity, collaborative work, or Indigenous archaeology—were settled. I learned that my identity and subsequently my project would be guided not by the common sense I had imagined but instead by the opinions and arbitration of archaeologists working across time periods and geographies.

It is not clear whether my complex relationship with my own Indigenous identity influences my interactions in archaeology or whether the increased emphasis on recruiting Indigenous researchers and expanding Indigenous archaeologies has created an environment of increased scrutiny for Indigenous people. I do know that my positionality as both a white woman and a tribal member has led me to experience archaeology differently. Because I am not legibly Indigenous and can therefore choose to disclose my status as a tribal member or not, I have often felt the temperature of the room change or the nature of the conversation shift. Further, as an archaeologist who has spent much of my career working outside of the Alutiiq community, I have experienced the relative freedom from

identity introspection and positionality-critique experienced by those working outside of their communities. For archaeologists working from an etic perspective, there is very little or no requirement that they discuss their relationship to place, community, or ethnicity during archaeological research. In contrast, as a white and Indigenous archaeologist working in and with my Indigenous community, I am often confronted with the difficult task of assessing my own Indigeneity and the assumption that my tribal affiliation makes me an expert on my culture and community. This creates and feeds a problem wherein Indigenous archaeologists are called on to share their personal, cultural, and familial experiences (in publications, at conferences, in private conversations) as a matter of course to verify and authenticate their Indigeneity and index their emic perspective. Not only does this reify the concept of Indigenous people as subject, it also asks Indigenous archaeologists to forsake or deemphasize parts of them that do not fit the narrative of Indigeneity. This issue plagues not just Indigenous archaeologists but also other nonwhite, nonmale, nonstraight, and/or disabled archaeologists who are frequently asked to define their status and discuss their experiences (e.g., Ault 2022; Capello 2022; Franklin 1997; Heath-Stout 2024).

The constant questioning and discussion of my identity (whether direct or indirect) has frequently caused me to reconsider the endeavor. To succeed as an archaeologist studying my community, it feels as if I must expose my personal life, my identity, and my family to the scrutiny of non-Indigenous and Indigenous archaeologists alike for assessment before my work can be evaluated on its merits. I debate whether opportunities afforded to me (e.g., conference session and paper invitations, scholarships and grants, opportunities to collaborate) are based solely on my Bureau of Indian Affairs Certificate of Indian Blood. As a result, I sometimes imagine a world where I do not acknowledge my tribal membership or once again move away from Alutiiq archaeology to the relative comfort of studying someone else's community. Yet, I remain committed to the task of dismantling and correcting the categorizations of Indigeneity that have been sculpted and upheld by archaeology. Ultimately, I focus my attention on the important work of my dissertation, which seeks to examine the meaning of the Kodiak landscape to Alutiiq people in the past, present, and future while recognizing that our history and future are our own to write, as archaeologists or not.

In addition to creating an extractive and alienating environment for emerging researchers, the emphasis on Indigenous categories can undermine the diversity of Indigenous experiences by suggesting the value of Indigenous people to archaeology lies solely in their ability to work from an emic perspective, relying on the corpus of their community knowledge to the exclusion of other skills, interests, or theoretical frames. For those who aren't knowledge bearers, who grew up outside of their community or closer to another branch of their family, an emphasis on insider cultural knowledge can expose insecurities. As D. Kalani Heinz puts it:

> Being a Hawaiian archaeologist means that I must face my own insecurities head on every day. I have to push down the feeling that I am not Hawaiian enough because I was raised outside of Hawai'i. . . . Being a Hawaiian archaeologist means stressing out and second guessing myself every time I speak *'ōlelo Hawai'i* because I cannot seem to shake my *haole* (foreign) accent. I fumble through the words and feel like I'm dishonoring my *kupuna* (ancestors). (Heinz 2022:126)

When archaeologists attempt to categorize Indigeneity, the message projected is that only Indigenous people who fit the academic category should pursue a career in archaeology. That is, Indigenous people with etic perspectives and methodologies or those motivated by a desire to connect with community through archaeology are not the right kind of Indigenous archaeologist. The ubiquity of these experiences among Indigenous archaeologists working within their communities is demonstrable in the considerable personal anecdotes and stories shared in edited volumes (Atalay 2012; Nicholas 2010a; Nicholas and Watkins 2024; Van Alst and Shield Chief Gover 2024). I suspect the emphasis on categorizing Indigeneity is a barrier to recruiting and retaining a more diverse group of archaeologists.

Conversations and discussions about who and what is Indigenous highlight and uphold the unbalanced power system and, I suggest, will negatively impact the type of Indigenous archaeologists joining the field and the archaeologies that are practiced in the future. Defining Indigeneity in opposition to the hegemonic, etic perspective may cause a bottlenecking of Indigenous archaeologists in two ways. First, upholding an ideal of Indigeneity will prevent potential Indigenous archaeologists from perceiving themselves and their perspectives as valuable if they fail to meet the established category of Indigeneity, as upheld by the discipline. This has the effect of presaging

the type of work Indigenous archaeologists ought to do, without allowing them to speak on behalf of their own communities or interests—a luxury offered to non-Indigenous researchers. Second, an uncritical acceptance of the Indigenous category is likely to influence the type of students to whom faculty give opportunities by preferencing those who conform to the academy's categorizations of Indigeneity. Not only does this have implications for the recruitment and retention of future archaeologists, it also perpetuates the dominance of the academy in defining and enacting Indigenous archaeology.

Beyond controlling the categorization of Indigeneity, much of the scholarship in support of Indigenous archaeologies insists that Indigenous researchers are important primarily because they possess a contrasting and/or complementary emic perspective to the (necessary) etic one (c.f. Nicholas 2010a; Nicholas and Watkins 2024). This assertion—that Indigenous perspectives should always be braided or accompanied by non-Indigenous ones—serves to both imply that Indigenous people inherently possess an experiential, emic perspective of their Indigenous communities and that non-Indigenous researchers offer an objective, etic one. These dichotomous categorizations of emic/etic, Indigenous/non-Indigenous, subjective/objective, experiential/scientific offer too confining a view for researchers of all ilk. I suspect this may serve to push non-Indigenous researchers away from meaningful collaboration with descendant communities and towards the relative safety of noncollaborative work. Worse, a determination of the skillsets and theoretical frame of individuals based on their status as Indigenous/non-Indigenous may discourage archaeologists across the spectrum from attempting and innovating new theories and methods for meaningful work like braiding knowledge (Atalay 2020) survivance/thrivance theory (Acebo and Martinez 2018; Gonzalez 2024; Kretzler and Gonzalez 2023; Miller 2023), archaeologies of persistence (Panich 2013; Silliman 2020), and others.

TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE ARCHAEOLOGY

It is tempting to view my experiences as unique among archaeologists of other backgrounds, but both my conversations with other archaeologists and published accounts indicate these issues are common (Nicholas 2010a; Nicholas and Watkins 2024; Silliman 2008; Steeves 2021; Van Alst and Shield Chief Gover 2024). I further suspect that asking Indigenous archaeologists to situate their Indigeneity in the name of objectivity or situated subjectivity is a barrier that prevents prospective archaeologists with myriad backgrounds from beginning or continuing careers with their communities or pursuing research in other communities aligned with their interests and expertise. By constraining the meaning of Indigeneity and Indigenous archaeology, the field collapses the potential for theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical innovation. The added stress over identity, required introspection, and responsibility to community create standards for Indigenous researchers that may constrain the ability of Indigenous archaeologists to reach beyond the categorization proffered by the academy. When the standards for Indigeneity are created and perpetuated outside of communities, breaking out of those categories becomes the necessary first step towards innovation, a condition I suspect will slow the growth of the field and the addition of a greater diversity of researchers.

In seeking to support the ongoing efforts to decolonize archaeological practice, I suggest that a clear path forward to recruiting and retaining Indigenous archaeologists is to deemphasize the category of Indigeneity in research. Instead, archaeologists should shift the focus to the methodology of community-engaged research (*e.g.,* Atalay 2012) and expand conversations on positionality to include all researchers. Doing so can foster a field that is more welcoming to archaeologists of diverse backgrounds and create equity in the burden of self-reflection. This idea is not new (Atalay 2020; Deloria 1997; Echo-Hawk 2000; Watkins 2000), but I have sought to explicitly tie the current, harmful discourse on the categorization of Indigeneity to the difficulties of training as an Indigenous and white archaeologist.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the use of categories is essential to archaeological inquiry and called for the deemphasis of categories around identity. In discussing the categorization of archaeological material, Sarah Jackson (2014:128) argues that the act of categorization has the effect of turning messy, complicated information into neat and manageable categories (i.e., "domesticating" data) and therefore "highlight[ing] certain aspects of data, people, and ideas… [where] other possible ways of relating to our data simply become an underlay." In recognizing the necessity of domestication through categorization, Jackson

advocates for finding ways to rethink categories and develop methods that respect and even emphasize the "dynamism, complexity, hybridity, and contradiction" of data (2014:125). Allowing for the multiplicity of Indigeneity and rejecting a unifying definition, I take up Jackson's call to look for ways to reimagine how the work might be done. Rather than finding students and projects to fit the mold of Indigenous archaeologist/-ies, we should instead focus on creating and testing methods and hypotheses that can speak to the nuances and variety of the human condition—in the past, present, and future. This tack allows researchers from a range of backgrounds to divorce themselves from the expectations of their identities and focus on doing archaeology in service to and in collaboration with communities.

I echo the sentiments posed by George Nicholas (2010b) that Indigenous archaeology should be removed from the sidelines and instead fully incorporated into the goals and methods of mainstream archaeological practice. By untethering Western anthropological notions of Indigeneity from expectations of Indigenous researchers, the field can instead focus on recruiting Indigenous researchers with varied theoretical interests, traditional knowledge, community involvement, and backgrounds into archaeology rather than targeting those Indigenous people who fit the authorized definition. Focusing on the inherently subjective nature of research and encouraging thoughtful self-reflection and unconscious bias evaluation for all researchers (not just those working within their own communities) can drive archaeology towards meaningful collaboration between archaeologists of diverse backgrounds. Instead of laying the burden of ethical, community-grounded work at the feet of Indigenous researchers, archaeologists should move beyond identity and instead focus on the scholastic contributions, interests, and skills of Indigenous archaeologists in service of creating and fostering meaningful community-driven projects.

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